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Benshi and the Introduction of Motion Pictures to Japan

JEFFREY A. DYM

THROUGHOUT the silent film era in Japan (1896–1932), no matter what the movie theater, there was sure to be one distinctive cinematic element: the *benshi* 弁士, or “silent film narrator.” Whether the theater held two hundred or three thousand, whether one sweltered in the summer heat or froze during the unheated winter, whether one sat on tatami after having checked one’s footwear with the “footwear man” or on a hard wooden bench placed directly on the dirt floor in front of the screen, a *benshi* (or a group of *benshi*) situated in the shadows next to the screen would supply a vocal narration called *setsumei* 説明 to enhance the silent moving images. The *benshi*’s primary job was to help the spectators understand the action on the screen. He did this with both explanatory narration and dialogue delivered in the mimetic voices of a wide spectrum of characters ranging from young high-pitched maidens to deep, husky brutes.¹

While “motion picture lecturers” existed outside of Japan, they were the exception rather than the rule.² By and large, music and sound effects were the only aural components added to silent pictures. Lecturers were never a central component in the cinematic experience, and they rarely prospered financially. In Japan, on the other hand, music and sound effects were of secondary importance to the aural star, the *benshi*. *Benshi* thrived throughout the silent era, and some succeeded in obtaining large incomes. Although the techniques, forms, and styles of *benshi* presentation evolved and changed dramatically over time, the basic functions of the *benshi* remained constant; in broad terms, they were to market the cinema, to attract audiences to performances, and to educate viewers regarding what appeared on the screen.

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¹ Given that the founding *benshi* were male and that over 90 percent of all *benshi* were male, I will use the masculine pronoun throughout.

² By “outside Japan” I mean outside the Japanese wartime empire and Japanese overseas communities. *Benshi* existed in the Japanese colonies of Korea and Taiwan, as well as the puppet state of Manchukuo. They also could be found in cities with a high concentration of Japanese immigrants, such as Honolulu, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. In all these places, indigenous, transplanted, and visiting *benshi* from the home islands performed *setsumei*.

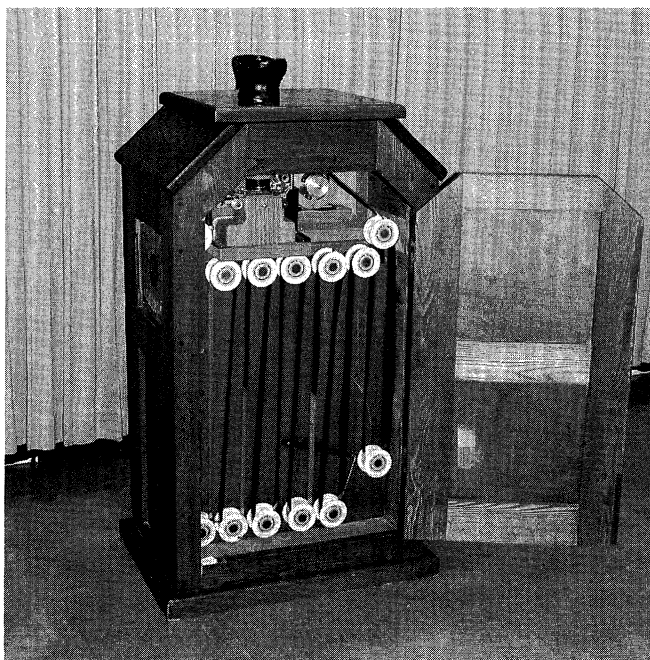


Figure 1. Kinetoscope (1894, United States). In the collection of Nihon Daigaku Geijutsu Gakubu Eiga Gakka.

Several previous studies have examined the legacy of the founding *benshi* to later *setsumei* technique.³ My concern here will be rather the part played by *benshi* in introducing cinema to Japan. This is not a quest for “the founder.” There is no individual patriarch who gave birth to the art of *setsumei* and whom later *benshi* could rightfully regard as “father.” Nor is it important that there be one. All the people mentioned in this article contributed to the establishment of a practice that was to be an integral part of the Japanese silent era.

The First Motion Picture Machines

The emergence of *benshi* owed much to the nature of the early forms of motion pictures. We may thus begin our consideration of the part *benshi* played in the development of Japanese cinema by taking a look at motion picture machines and the entrepreneurs who initially imported them to Japan. The first motion picture machine introduced into Japan was the Kinetoscope (figure 1). Invented by Thomas Edison, the Kinetoscope was a self-contained, box-shaped moving picture apparatus that allowed an individual viewer to watch a short motion picture. By simultaneously cranking the handle positioned on the side of the machine and looking through the viewer on the top, a spectator could watch roughly twenty seconds of moving pictures.

³ See, for example, Burch 1979; Iwamoto 1974; Tanaka 1957; Yoshida 1978.

The Kinetoscope was presented to the Japanese public by Takahashi Shinji 高橋信治 (1851–1915). Takahashi first encountered the machine at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago—the widely publicized event at which Edison revealed his invention to the world. Although Takahashi wanted immediately to purchase a Kinetoscope, it was only in 1896 that he was able to buy two from the Bruhel brothers who owned a watch business in Yokohama.⁴ By mid-1897 accounts of the Kinetoscope disappear from the public record. As was true elsewhere in the world, its popularity was cut short by the appearance of projected motion pictures that could be viewed simultaneously by many people. Two competing types of machine entered the country at virtually the same time: from Europe came the Cinématographe and from the United States the Vitascope.

The Cinématographe was imported into Japan by Inahata Katsutarō 稲畑勝太郎 (1862–1936). In 1877 Inahata had gone to France to study at the La Martinière technical college in Lyons. One of his classmates happened to be Auguste Lumière (1864–1948), the elder of the two Lumière brothers who ultimately invented one of the first projecting motion picture machines. After graduation, Inahata returned to Japan and began working in the textile industry, eventually opening his own dyeing factory. While on a business trip to France in 1896 to examine textile- and dyeing-related machines, he ran into his old classmate, Auguste Lumière, who told him about his latest invention: the Cinématographe. Instantly enamored with what he saw, Inahata purchased the rights to distribute the Cinématographe in Japan. After agreeing to pay the Lumières 60 percent of all profits,⁵ he returned to Japan with several machines.⁶

Inahata's first public showing of the Cinématographe was at the Nanchi Enbujō 南地演舞場 theater in Osaka on 15 February 1897.⁷ Within weeks of the Cinématographe's introduction in the Kansai region, two other Cinématographes imported by Inahata were released in Kantō. One machine, which Inahata had given to Yokota Einosuke 横田永之助, the younger brother of a friend, opened at the Kawakamiza 川上座 theater in Tokyo on 8 March 1897.⁸ The other, marketed

⁴ Tsukada 1980, pp. 62–76.

⁵ Inahata 1935, p. 71.

⁶ It is unclear exactly how many machines Inahata imported into Japan. Some sources say two, others, three. As Tsukada Yoshinobu 塚田嘉信 points out, however, given the dates and places of exhibition, he must have imported at least four if not five machines. Tsukada 1980, pp. 124–41. Mitsuda Yuri 光田由里 asserts that Inahata imported two machines and François Girel one. Mitsuda 1995, p. 47.

⁷ *Mainichi shinbun* 1897. According to several statements made by Inahata, a preview showing was held in the garden of a Kyoto electric company (京都四条河原町の電気会社) sometime between 11–14 February 1897. Inahata states that the show was so popular that the crowds destroyed the vegetable store next door. Inahata 1935, p. 71; Inahata 1926, pp. 438–39. Despite the popularity of the apparatus, Inahata soon left the entertainment business and returned to the world of textiles, where he invented the method for dyeing khaki. Later he became a member of the House of Peers. Takanashi 1938, p. 331.

⁸ Yokota had planned to open on 5 March, but because of apparent mechanical problems the debut of the Cinématographe was delayed until 8 March. *Miyako shinbun* 1897a; *Miyako shinbun* 1897c; *Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun* 1897b.

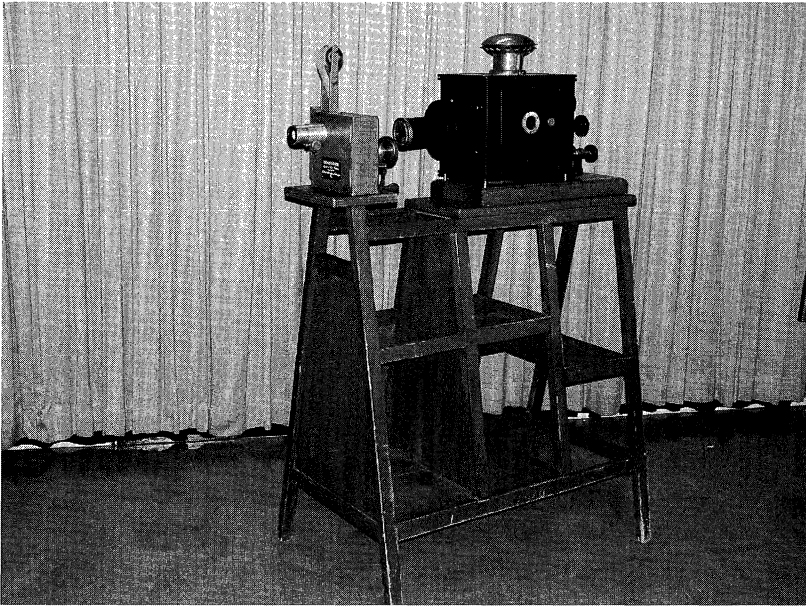


Figure 2. Cinématographe (1895, France). In the collection of Nihon Daigaku Geijutsu Gakubu Eiga Gakka.

under the name of Yoshizawa 吉沢, opened at the Yokohama Minatoza 横浜港座 theater on 9 March.⁹

Unlike the Kinetoscope, which only one person could view at a time, the Cinématographe projected motion pictures onto a screen—initially about 1.5 meters wide and 1.8 meters high. Audiences of several hundred people could thus watch together. The Cinématographe was a combination camera, projector, and printer (figure 2). Hand cranked, it needed no electrical current to operate. When it was used as a projector, limelight or another nonelectrical source could take the place of an electrical light.

While Inahata Katsutarō, Yokota Einosuke, and the Yoshizawa company were busy promoting the Lumières' Cinématographe, Araki Waichi 荒木和一 and Arai Saburō 新居三郎 were just as busy importing and promoting Edison's Vitascope (figure 3). Araki Waichi saw the Kinetoscope when he visited the United States in 1894. He planned to buy one on a return trip in 1896, but by that time the more impressive Vitascope was already available. The Vitascope had premiered at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City in April 1896. Araki first viewed it in Chicago later that year and rushed to Edison's laboratory in New York to buy one.¹⁰

⁹ Tsukada 1980, pp. 247–70.

¹⁰ *Katsudō zasshi* 1922b, p. 83; Araki 1935. While Araki clearly purchased and exhibited a Vitascope, the photograph of a contract between him and Edison published in *Kinema junpō* indicates that he bought a "Standard Edison kineto scope" for \$100. *Kinema junpō* 195.

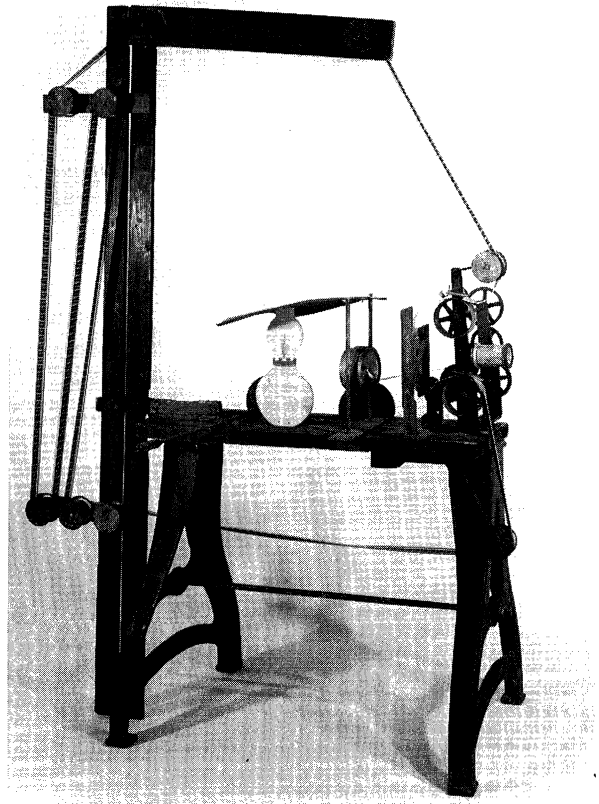


Figure 3. Vitascope (1896, United States). Item 6243 in the collection of the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum.

Although marketed as “Edison’s Vitascope,” the projector was actually invented by Thomas Armat and C. Francis Jenkins. Edison acquired the rights to produce and sell the machine under his name, which led to the impression that it was his invention. As the film historian Robert C. Allen puts it, “The only thing Edison had contributed to the development of the Vitascope was the imprimatur of his name.”¹¹ Unlike the Cinématographe, which was both a camera and a projector, the Vitascope was solely a projector. Both machines, nevertheless, worked on the principle of intermittent motion; that is, they both allowed each frame to remain stationary on the screen for about one-sixteenth of a second, thus creating the illusion of motion.

The first official showing of the Vitascope in Japan was by Araki Waichi on 22 February 1897 at the Shinmachi Enbujō 新町演舞場 theater in Osaka. Two

¹¹ Allen 1983, p. 148.

weeks later, on 6 March, Arai Saburō held the first public showing of the Vitascope in Tokyo at the Kanda Kinkikan 神田錦輝館 theater. Arai's machine was imported by Shibata Chūjirō 柴田忠次郎, apparently an employee of Arai's import company.¹²

Problem Solving

The discovery of motion pictures, and financial investment in and import of the machines, were merely the first steps in the introduction of cinema into Japan. There was no guarantee that the entrepreneurs would profit from their investment, especially since motion pictures were just one of a myriad of Western wonders of science introduced into Japan around the turn of the twentieth century. Other inventions competing for attention were x-ray machines and phonographs. From the time they acquired their equipment, the initial Japanese motion picture entrepreneurs faced numerous challenges and dilemmas, ranging from mechanical difficulty to the effective marketing of their product. Their solutions to these problems left a lasting imprint on cinema in Japan.

Upon returning to Japan from the United States with their Vitascope, both Arai Saburō and Araki Waichi immediately encountered a daunting technical problem. The Vitascope required direct current, which was hardly available anywhere in Japan at that time.¹³ Arai overcame the problem by modifying a gas engine, acquired from friends who ran the Jūmonji import company 十文字商会, to use as a power source for the projector.¹⁴ For the short term, Araki solved his electrical impasse by holding a preview showing of his Vitascope inside the Fukuoka ironworks 福岡鉄工場 factory in Osaka. The factory had a direct current generator. The exact date of the preview showing is uncertain, but it was probably sometime in January 1897.¹⁵ The records do not reveal how Araki powered his projector after that initial showing on the factory floor.

During the first decade after the Cinématographe's introduction, there are frequent reports of the images being projected from behind the screen. Apparently

¹² *Yomiuri shinbun* 1897. There is proof that the machine was imported by an employee of the Arai company and that Shibata Chūjirō imported the Vitascope. No direct evidence, however, links Shibata to Arai. According to Nakagawa Keiji 中川慶二, one of the first *benshi*, the Yoshizawa company and the Arai company were aware of each other's import of motion picture machines and feared the competition this could cause. They both felt that if they tried to exhibit their films in Tokyo at the same time they would not be able to earn a profit. An agreement was therefore reached that Yoshizawa would exhibit its Cinématographe in Yokohama, while Arai would show its Vitascope in Tokyo. Nakagawa fails to mention Yokota's Cinématographe, which also opened in Tokyo at roughly the same time. Nakagawa 1921a.

¹³ *Asahi shinbun* 1922; *Katsudō zasshi* 1922b. There were also electrical problems with exhibiting the Vitascope in the United States. "All the early Vitascope were made to work only on direct current, and in 1896, municipal lighting systems were a hodge-podge of incompatible currents and voltages." Allen 1983, p. 149.

¹⁴ Several advertisements state that it was supplied by Jūmonji Shinsuke 十文字信介. See *Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun* 1897a; *Miyako shinbun* 1897b. A few, however, simply say that it was supplied by "the Jūmonji company." See *Hōchi shinbun* 1897.

¹⁵ *Asahi shinbun* 1897; Tsukada 1980, pp. 183–94.

the operators were unsure how to use the projector.¹⁶ This is curious since one of the features that set the Cinématographe apart from its diverse competitors in this fledgling industry was its “complete package” approach to distribution. When the Lumières marketed the Cinématographe they sent from Lyons with the machine an “operator” who worked as a distributor, exhibitor, filmmaker, and Lumière accountant.

The person sent to Japan in this capacity was François Constant Girel (1873–1952). He arrived on 9 January 1897 and stayed in Japan until December.¹⁷ Although Inahata initially referred to Girel as his “auditor,” by the end of their relationship the entrepreneur was calling the Frenchman an “incompetent fool” because of his inability to resolve the periodic technical problems that arose with the Cinématographe.¹⁸ Girel was evidently more interested in making movies than in projecting them and instructing the Japanese how to use the machines. While in Japan, he shot several films of everyday life for the Lumière company.¹⁹

In addition to overcoming technical difficulties, cinema entrepreneurs faced the problem of distinguishing their product from traditional theater and the numerous other occidental inventions entering the country. To publicize his Cinématographe exhibitions, Inahata Katsutarō hired the billboard painter Nomura Yoshikuni 野村芳圀 (1854–1903). At the time, billboards were one of the primary means of theater advertising.²⁰ The Arai company drummed up business for its Vitascope by hiring Akita Ryūkichi 秋田柳吉, the owner of the Hiromeya 広目屋 advertising agency, to publicize its shows. Akita promoted the Vitascope by hiring a *jinta* ジンタ band to travel in a boat along the canal that ran between the Arai company and the theater at which the Vitascope was being exhibited. Often used during the Meiji era as a means of advertising, *jinta* bands played circus-like music. The band hired by Akita also provided background music for the films. It is not clear to what extent conventional billboard and *jinta* advertising lured people away from competing exhibitions of x-ray machines and phonographs, or the traditional theater. What is evident, however, is that most early exhibitions played to full houses.

Other entrepreneurs marketed cinema by endowing it with a high-class image. Takahashi Shinji postponed presenting his Kinetoscope to the public until after

¹⁶ Nakagawa 1921a, p. 35; Mizuno 1963b, p. 3.

¹⁷ Mitsuda 1995, pp. 44–59. Mitsuda’s analysis of the length of Girel’s stay is based on the latter’s diary. Foreign Ministry records indicate that the work permit issued Girel was valid only from 21 February to 30 March 1897. Foreign Ministry Record 1897.

¹⁸ High 1984, p. 24.

¹⁹ Girel did not limit himself to filming in the major cities, but traveled throughout Japan, including Hokkaido where he took pictures of Ainu. He developed the movies in Japan and sent them back to France to be exhibited throughout Europe and the United States. Throughout much of the silent era, films of oriental exoticism were popular in the West. Several of the films shot by Girel and others during the late 1890s and early 1900s still survive. They provide a rare look into Japanese society at the turn of the century. Almost none of the motion pictures that Girel shot in Japan were ever shown domestically. Komatsu 1996, pp. 435–38. For still photographs from these films, see Yoshida et al. 1995.

²⁰ Inahata 1935, p. 72.

he had shown it to dignitaries and officials. The crown prince, later the emperor Taishō, was in Kobe shortly after Takahashi's Kinetoscope arrived in Japan, and he viewed the machine on 17 November 1896, the first day of Takahashi's private showings.²¹ When Takahashi advertised his public exhibitions he stressed the cachet this added to his import by printing in the largest type "Graced by His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince."²²

Given the high price of the machines themselves, import costs, and marketing and exhibition expenditures, most initial movie exhibitors sold tickets at prices comparable to those of stage theater. At a time when one could go to a sumo tournament for around fifty sen, visit a museum or the zoo for the entire day for under four sen, and attend the theater for between twenty-five sen and five yen,²³ it cost between twenty and thirty sen to view the Kinetoscope for only a couple of minutes,²⁴ while to see the Vitascope or Cinématographe cost between eight sen and one yen.²⁵ Since exhibitors charged prices similar to live theater, they had to put on a show of equal value. A problem they faced in this regard was the short length of the early films. Most films were only a few tens of seconds to a few minutes in duration. Through various means early exhibitors succeeded in lengthening their shows to up to three hours.²⁶ One strategy was to make running the projector an elaborate production. Until the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), several installations employed ten-person crews to run the projector. One person cranked the film, another focused the lens, a third rewound the film, a fourth threaded it through the machine. There was also someone to make sure that everything on the screen was all right, a boy to fan those working around the projector, a general supervisor, and several others with unspecified duties.²⁷ In an effort to clarify the picture, some exhibitors even hired a person to water the screen down between showings.²⁸ After the initial excitement over cinema began to wane and knowledge about how to use the machines increased, the number paid to operate the machine was pared down.²⁹ Usually one or two operators were all that was needed.

²¹ *Kōbe yūshin nippō*, 1896a.

²² See, for example, *Kōbe yūshin nippō* 1896b; *Mainichi shinbun* 1896.

²³ *Shūkan asahi* 1982, vol. 1, pp. 45, 80; vol. 2, p. 225; vol. 3, p. 119.

²⁴ According to Takahashi Shinshichi 高橋真七, the son of Takahashi Shinji, the fee was thirty sen in Kobe and twenty sen in Osaka. Takahashi 1935.

²⁵ *Hōchi shinbun* 1897; *Miyako shinbun* 1897a–b; *Miyako shinbun* 1899; *Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun* 1897a. With few exceptions the price of admission to a movie house remained consistent throughout the silent era: the average price of admission was about 50 sen, with ticket prices varying between 10 sen—for third- or fourth-class tickets—to 1 yen for first class or special seating.

²⁶ Nakagawa 1911a.

²⁷ Nakagawa 1911a; Nakagawa 1911b; Nakagawa 1921a, p. 35; *Mainichi shinbun* 1912a; Anderson and Richie 1982, p. 22.

²⁸ The practice of watering down the screen appears to have begun when the pictures were projected from behind the screen. It continued for several years, even after it became customary to project the Cinématographe from the front of the screen. Uehara Michirō 植原路郎 remembers the screen being watered down when motion pictures were first exhibited in Nagano in 1903. Uehara 1962. It appears that this practice was only employed for the Cinématographe.

²⁹ According to an article about Japanese cinema published in the British film magazine

Another means early exhibitors used to lengthen their shows was to extend the projection time by “looping” (*tasuki* 襷) the film. The ends of the film were joined so that the twenty seconds to two minutes of film could be projected continuously for five to ten minutes. Even with looping, the projection time was still only several minutes in duration. The repeated images of, say, chickens approaching feed and eating it could mesmerize audiences for only so long. One way to further enliven the projected images and lengthen the time of presentation was to hire someone to expound on how the projectors worked, who invented them, where they came from, what the film was about, and, perhaps most importantly, to explain the Western exotica it contained. The first men employed to perform these tasks were the founding *benshi*. A statement by one of the first patrons of the Kinetoscope affirms that such figures were an integral part of cinema exhibitions in Japan from the start.

Only one person could view the Kinetoscope at a time, so there were a lot of people in the waiting room. In the alcove were a pine tree and an interesting model train that ran on electricity. Many people had gathered to watch the Kinetoscope. *A man stood next to the machine and explained everything.* People were called in one at a time to view the Kinetoscope, which was installed in the adjoining room. I saw a film showing Westerners standing up and wildly firing their guns in all directions. Since I was a child, I thought that the bullets being fired were causing the screen to sparkle. This film was called *The Shooting of the Westerner's Spencer Gun*. It was so interesting that I pestered my elder brother to take me again. (Emphasis added)³⁰

Setsumei's Narrative Heritage

By incorporating *benshi* into their show from the outset, the pioneer motion picture entrepreneurs transformed the nature of cinema, making the Japanese “silent era” distinctive in the annals of film history. Perhaps one reason why Japanese audiences readily accepted *benshi* was because they fit into the prevalent practice of commingled theater—that is, performances in which two (or more) separate but equal forms of narrative information, usually one visual, the other aural, coalesce into one presentation.³¹ While the aural element, provided by a narrator or commentator, was often physically separate from the visual element, spectators experienced an aesthetic harmony, as two separate sources of information were united into a whole that was greater than the sum of the two parts.

One of the oldest types of commingled presentation is *etoki* 絵解き (mandala preaching, picture explanation). In *etoki*, a priest or nun would typically display pictures or mandala illustrating a religious doctrine or historical tale to an audi-

Kinetograph and Lantern Weekly sometime before 1914, “five or six people were ‘working’ in the projection room, though most were playing.” It appears, therefore, that at some theaters the practice of employing several projectionists continued for some time. Given the cost of employing so many unnecessary workers, however, I doubt that this custom was widespread. J. C. A. 1914.

³⁰ Mizuno 1963a, p. 3.

³¹ Anderson 1992, pp. 262–68.

ence and then expound upon the doctrine or events depicted, pointing at the picture to reinforce visually what he or she was saying. Some performers improvised, while others worked from a memorized text or read from a book. According to the medieval Japanese literature specialist Barbara Ruch, in *etoki* “painting, story, chanter, and even the sounding of musical instruments (often pure sound rather than music) combined to create a total audio-visual experience rare, if not unique, in the premodern history of world literature.”³² One could say the same of *benshi* and silent films in the history of world cinema.

Kabuki, noh, and especially bunraku puppet theater offer other examples of commingled theater. In these traditions an individual chanter (or a group of chanters) carries all or part of the vocal narration of a performance. The characters themselves and the chanter(s) usually share the vocal burden in kabuki and noh, while in bunraku the voices for everyone in the drama are provided by the *jōruri* chanter(s). The narrator in traditional Japanese theater is thus removed from, yet corresponds with, the characters. The result is a divided but total spectacle.³³ Some of the reasons for this structure lie in the origins of the particular theatrical form. Bunraku, for example, emerged in the seventeenth century from the mixing of two independent art forms: puppetry and *jōruri* storytelling. *Jōruri* texts became the basis for many bunraku plays and figure significantly in those kabuki plays adapted from bunraku.

The immediate precursors to *benshi* were the narrators for *gentō* 幻燈, magic lantern shows, a popular form of entertainment throughout Japan at the end of the Tokugawa period and in early Meiji.³⁴ The Dutch introduced magic lanterns into Japan in the 1770s, roughly one hundred years after they emerged in Europe.³⁵ Over the ensuing years, *gentō* evolved into a theatrical form of presentation in which one or more projectionists manipulated from one to ten projectors. Several projectors might cast fixed scenic images onto the screen throughout the show, while the operator(s) manipulated others to give characters portrayed on the slides a sense of movement reminiscent of live performers. An oral narrative, provided by either one of the projectionists or a separate narrator, and frequently accompanied by a shamisen, further infused the slides with life. Advertisements for *gentō* projectors and slides continued to appear as late as 1916, nearly twenty years after the introduction of motion pictures into Japan, attesting to the continued popularity of this form of entertainment.³⁶

Oral narration accompanying a visual art was thus part of a long tradition. It was not fabricated specifically for motion pictures. *Benshi* did not emerge “because psychologically the Japanese like to have things explained to them.”³⁷

³² Ruch 1977, p. 288.

³³ Hoff 1985, p. 7; Barthes 1982, p. 55.

³⁴ *Gentō* is also known as *utsushie* 写し絵. Technically *gentō* and *utsushie* used different types of slides and catered to different clientele—*gentō* was for the elite, *utsushie* for the masses; nevertheless, for all intents and purposes they were basically the same in that both were magic lanterns.

³⁵ Iwamoto 1993, p. 190.

³⁶ See *Kinema Record* 1916a.

³⁷ Yoshida 1978, p. 3.

Rather, the addition of *benshi* to motion pictures fit into a style of performance to which Japanese audiences were accustomed.

Performers, Pitchmen, Peddlers, and Attractions

The essential ingredient in commingled theater is a skilled orator who can enliven the visual element with entertaining speech. It would take decades for cinema to achieve the perfect marriage of moving pictures and detached voice. The introductory years were a time of trial and error, when exhibitors employed various types of vocal performers. Given the fact that most exhibitors were trying to stage a production commensurate with a playhouse performance, it is not surprising that several founding *benshi* had backgrounds in traditional Japanese theater.

To provide a running commentary for his inaugural Cinématographe exhibition on 15 February 1897, Inahata Katsutarō hired Takahashi Senkichi 高橋仙吉, an apprentice of the famed kabuki actor Kataoka Nizaemon 片岡仁左衛門 XI.³⁸ Little is known about Takahashi, who apparently provided *setsumei* for the Cinématographe on this occasion alone.³⁹ While the records do not indicate why Inahata selected him, the fact that Takahashi had received voice training in a traditional theatrical narrative art was likely a factor. Takahashi Senkichi nevertheless was not Inahata's first choice. Inahata had initially asked Ueda Hoteiken 上田布袋軒 (1849–?) to provide *setsumei* for his production, but Ueda declined on the grounds that he did not know a foreign language. A few days later, however, Araki Waichi was somehow able to convince him to provide a running commentary for the 22 February 1897 Vitascope première.⁴⁰

Ueda Hoteiken was born Ueda Tsunejirō 上田恒次郎 to a family of Osaka merchants. He never liked the family business and left it to work as a circus barker. He later became a *gidayū katari* 義太夫語り (ballad-drama chanter) and reportedly received the name Hoteiken from his *gidayū* master, Takemoto Tsudayū 竹本津太夫. Ueda performed *gidayū* for twenty years, during which time he often served as a master of ceremonies for the Western circus-like shows that came to town.⁴¹ Ueda's background in *gidayū* combined with his experience as a master of ceremonies was why Inahata Katsutarō, Araki Waichi, and perhaps even Takahashi Shinji, the importer of the Kinetoscope, wanted Ueda for their shows.⁴²

³⁸ Eisha Dōji 1916, pp. 151–52.

³⁹ It is unclear if he provided *setsumei* only on 15 February, for part of the 15–28 February booking, or for the entire booking.

⁴⁰ Eisha Dōji 1916, pp. 151–52.

⁴¹ Eisha Dōji 1916, pp. 149–50.

⁴² Ueda Hoteiken's name is the one most often associated with providing *setsumei* for the Kinetoscope exhibitions in Osaka that began on 29 January 1897. The repeated assertions found in secondary sources that he supplied *setsumei* for the Kinetoscope, however, remain problematic. The contention that Ueda gave *setsumei* for the Kinetoscope can be traced back to a series of articles appearing in *Mainichi shinbun* 16–28 April 1912. In one of these the author declares, "I heard Ueda Hoteiken was the *benshi* for the Kinetoscope when it was shown in Osaka." *Mainichi shinbun* 1912b. As a result of this and other statements in the series, subsequent histories of the first *benshi* have consistently identified Ueda as the founding father. It is possible that Hoteiken



Figure 4. Ueda Hoteiken. Photograph from *Shin engei* 1:3 (1916), p. 149; courtesy of the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum.

Ueda Hoteiken's oration was steady and swift, and he spoke as if there were nothing he did not know. For this reason, he was nicknamed "Mr. Know-It-All" (Kōman'ya 高慢屋). Ueda's *setsumei* for the Vitascope film *The Kiss* (Edison, 1896), which arrived in Japan near the end of 1897, provides ample evidence of

was the *benshi* for the Kinetoscope, but the 1916 article "Katsudō benshi no ganso" 活動弁士の元祖, which appeared in the periodical *Shin engei* 新演芸, raises doubts. Although published under the name Eisha Dōji 影斜童子, the article is basically a transcribed conversation by Ueda. In the article Ueda goes into great detail about the import of the Vitascope and Cinématographe but completely ignores the Kinetoscope. He variously states that Takahashi Senkichi—who performed *setsumei* for the first public showing of the Cinématographe when it opened in Osaka on 15 February 1897—and Ueda himself—who provided *setsumei* for the Vitascope when it opened in Osaka on 22 February 1897—were the first *benshi*. If Ueda had really done *setsumei* for the Kinetoscope several months prior to the Vitascope and Cinématographe showings he could have easily claimed the honor for himself alone. Since he does not, it is logical to assume that he was *not* the man who provided *setsumei* for the Kinetoscope. See Eisha Dōji 1916, pp. 150–52.

his skill as an orator. In the one-minute film, the famous stage actors John Rice and May Irwin embrace and kiss. Since the film was looped, the embracing and kissing was continually repeated. Araki Waichi was nervous about how the police, who were highly sensitive to issues related to public morals and who had the authority to stop any form of entertainment containing “obscene articles, arts, and other such things that are harmful to public morals,”⁴³ would react to the film. Ueda resolved the problems with aplomb by explaining in his opening remarks that Westerners traditionally greeted each other by kissing, similar to the Japanese custom of slapping a friend on the shoulder.⁴⁴ Satisfied by Ueda’s *setsumei*, the police allowed the show to continue, and it quickly became Japan’s first hit motion picture.

Ueda Hoteiken’s engaging and informative *setsumei* made him a popular *benshi* throughout his career. He was known for asking scholars about images found in new movies he was scheduled to narrate. The exact nature of the questions is unclear; however, given the fact that he was said to have queried shopkeepers about unfamiliar items that caught his eye as he walked down the street, we can assume that they were far ranging.⁴⁵ During his career, Ueda trained several people in the art of *setsumei*, including Ōyama Takayuki 大山孝之 and Eda Fushiki 江田不識, two outstanding *benshi* of the late Meiji and early Taishō eras. In 1908, however, his daughter-in-law became gravely ill; he lost his concentration and began to perform poorly. Feeling a sense of responsibility as one of the founding *benshi*, Ueda decided to retire from the profession he helped establish.⁴⁶

When the Yoshizawa Cinématographe opened at the Yokohama Minatoza theater on 9 March 1896, Nakagawa Keiji 中川慶二 (?–1923) gave the *setsumei*.⁴⁷ Also the son of a merchant, Nakagawa, like Ueda, hated the family business. He dropped out of Tokyo Prefectural Normal School 東京府立師範学校 to become a schoolteacher in the countryside. Later he entered Meiji Law School 明治法律学校, but left before finishing. For a short while he worked for the Hachiōji 八王子 court, but quit that job to travel around the nation as an itinerant artist, poet, and *gentō* performer. Bored with his bohemian life, Nakagawa joined the Jiyūtō 自由党 political party, helping politicians with their campaigns and giving introductory speeches at political rallies. Eventually, disgusted by the infighting, he left politics and went to work for the Yokohama Department of Water Works 横浜市水道事務所.⁴⁸ It was while he was working at the Yokohama Department of Water Works that Shiraishi Kame 白石龜, the projectionist hired for the Yoshizawa Cinématographe, asked him to provide *setsumei* for the Cinématographe’s Yokohama première. An old acquaintance, Shiraishi knew that Nakagawa was

⁴³ *Keisatsumei dai 15 gō*.

⁴⁴ Mizuno 1964, pp. 3–4.

⁴⁵ *Mainichi shinbun* 1912c.

⁴⁶ Eisha Dōji 1916, pp. 151–52.

⁴⁷ Kobayashi Isamu 小林いさむ writes that “a certain Honda” (本田某) also appears to have provided *setsumei* at the Minatoza theater. I have not been able to find any other information about Honda. Kobayashi 1933, pp. 2–3.

⁴⁸ Nakagawa 1921b, p. 36.

a gifted speaker who had provided narration for *gentō* performances. At length Nakagawa agreed to be the *benshi*, but only for a few days.⁴⁹ He had this to say about his first days as a *benshi*:

When I was to provide narration at a Yokohama theater, I would finish up at the office just as the theater was opening, run over there, and appear on stage. When I had to provide narration in Tokyo, at first I only worked at nights, so I could go to the theater in Tokyo after finishing at the office. After the theater had closed, I would return to Yokohama on the last train. The next day, like always, I would keep my *setsumei* activity secret. After I started doing two shows—one during the day and one at night—I became an absentee-worker. There was nothing else to do, because at that time there were no other *benshi*. In order to keep working for the government, I attached a medical note written by a doctor to the notice of absence I sent in. Periodically I would appear at the office. For a long time, no one noticed that I was a *benshi*. Finally the boss found out and I was fired. After that I concentrated on one thing only and left the government office to become a full-time movie *benshi*. A few months later, I moved from Yokohama to Tokyo and increasingly found my true calling in life.⁵⁰

Nakagawa's story is unusual because he left a respectable job to become an entertainer at a time when employment by the government was esteemed and working in entertainment scorned.

Even though he was a “lowly” entertainer, Nakagawa Keiji performed in front of nobles and members of the imperial family—including the crown prince (later the emperor Taishō)—on at least nineteen separate occasions.⁵¹ Later in his career, if an audience was unruly he would solemnly declare, “I, Nakagawa Keiji, had the honor to *setsumei* before His Imperial Majesty; nevertheless, you dishonor me by making noise. You are children!”⁵²

Nakagawa Keiji was one of the top *benshi* of the Meiji period. By the beginning of the Taishō period, however, he had grown old and anachronistic. During the first decade or so of motion pictures in Japan, some *benshi* provided *setsumei* that merely described what was taking place. But around 1908, motion pictures underwent a major transformation that caused *setsumei* to change as well. As audiences grew accustomed to the new marvel, they became bored with simple moving images of everyday life. To keep them entertained, filmmakers devised framing, editing, acting, *mise en scène*, and other techniques that allowed the presentation of longer narratives. These new movies required a more complex form of *setsumei*.⁵³ *Setsumei* that pointed out the obvious, such as the following one that Nakagawa provided for a scene in which a person was eating an apple, “It seems that this person is eating something,”⁵⁴ no longer sufficed. When

⁴⁹ Nakagawa 1921a, p. 35; Nakagawa 1911a.

⁵⁰ Nakagawa 1921b, p. 36.

⁵¹ *Katsudō shashinkai* 1909.

⁵² Tokugawa 1978, p. 129.

⁵³ Dym 1998, pp. 105–25.

⁵⁴ Yoshida 1973, pp. 22–23.

Nakagawa failed to adapt his *setsumeï* to the changing times, his career faded away. He died in the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923.

While some exhibitors sought to enliven their production by hiring men like Takahashi Senkichi, Ueda Hoteiken, and Nakagawa Keiji who had training in traditional narrative arts, selling the product to the public was as important as putting on a good show. Many of the first *benshi* thus had backgrounds in sales. Jūmonji Daigen 十文字大元 (1868–1924), the man hired by Arai Saburō to provide *setsumeï* for the 6 March 1897 Vitascope opening in Tokyo, was one such *benshi*.

Like other youth of his era, Jūmonji Daigen dreamed of studying in America and in 1890 enrolled at the University of Michigan. Feeling that he was spending too much time talking with the other twenty Japanese students at Michigan and not enough time studying English and learning about America, he soon left Ann Arbor and moved to Chicago, where he enrolled at the Bryant and Stratton Technical School, graduating three years later. After graduation he worked at several odd jobs and took part in setting up the Japanese pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago—the same event at which Takahashi Shinji first encountered the Kinetoscope. Afterward, Jūmonji Daigen became a representative for the Tokyo Export Association 東京出品協会 and an employee of the Japan Industrial Hall 日本工業館. His duties involved promoting Japanese products to Americans. He later went into business with his older brother Shinsuke 信介, importing from America such items as rifles, petroleum motors, fire extinguishers, motorcycles, and farm tools. Arai Saburō was friends with Jūmonji Shinsuke, and had become acquainted with the younger Jūmonji when they were both living in the United States.⁵⁵ When Arai purchased a petroleum motor from the Jūmonji import company to run his Vitascope, he prevailed upon Daigen to pitch his product. Daigen obliged and fulfilled his duties admirably. Because he was so busy with work at his company, however, he performed *setsumeï* only a few times.

Another early *benshi* with a pitchman background was Yokota Einosuke (1872–1943), who had received one of the Cinématographes from Inahata Katsutarō. Einosuke was the younger brother of Yokota Matsunosuke 横田松之助, a friend of Inahata from the United States. At the time Einosuke was working as a spieler for an electrical show called Mystery World 不思議館 where people could experience seeing through their bodies with the still-novel x-ray machine. Matsunosuke asked Inahata to give Einosuke the Cinématographe in the hope that it would encourage his brother to do something productive with his life.⁵⁶ Einosuke found the transition to hawking another Western marvel of science easy and natural and quickly became one of the giants of the first era of Japanese cinema. Although he frequently worked as a *benshi* during the early part of his career, his major contribution to Japanese cinema history was in the production end of Japanese

⁵⁵ Onoda 1926, p. 159.

⁵⁶ Inahata 1935, p. 71.

films. He founded one of the earliest motion picture companies, the Yokota company 横田商会, and later became the president of Japan's first large-scale motion picture studio, the Japan Motion Picture Company 日本活動写真株式会社, or Nikkatsu 日活.

The break Yokota Matsunosuke gave his younger brother clearly proved fortuitous. It also, perhaps, saved Einosuke from losing a limb as happened to the *benshi* Taniuchi Matsunosuke 谷内松之助. Taniuchi worked as a showman for a x-ray machine exhibition that competed with motion pictures throughout the late Meiji period. Having x-rayed his arm thousands of times in demonstrations, he eventually lost it to cancer. It was after the doctors amputated his arm that he became a *benshi*.

According to the motion picture director Nomura Hōtei 野村芳亭 (1880–1934), his father, Nomura Yoshikuni, hired the street vendor Sakata Chikuma 坂田千曲 to provide *setsumei* for the Cinématographe when Inahata Katsutarō exhibited it in Kyoto.⁵⁷ In other words, the billboard painter Inahata chose to promote his Cinématographe enlisted a peddler skilled in vending merchandise to help him market the new product. To give Sakata an air of prestige as well as to distinguish his product from the rest, Inahata had him wear a European frock coat when he took the stage. The Western subject matter he was supposed to explain, however, evidently overwhelmed the peddler.

Sakata was likely the *benshi* at the 1897 Kyoto Cinématographe exhibition in which a “filmed play” about Napoleon was shown. Filmed plays were movies made by setting a camera in front of a stage play and recording a segment, usually the most famous scene. Like most early motion pictures, this film was looped. According to one spectator at the performance, when the actor playing Napoleon appeared on the screen, the *benshi* became flustered and said, “This is Napoleon. Napoleon is Napoleon.” Every time thereafter when Napoleon appeared on screen the *benshi* repeated, “This is Napoleon. Napoleon is Napoleon,” much to the amusement of the audience.⁵⁸

Although some *benshi* gave nonsensical *setsumei*, it was the exception rather than the norm. Each motion picture machine was in fierce competition with other Western inventions, traditional entertainments, and different motion picture machines. If a *benshi* continually provided poor *setsumei*, people would turn to the competition. Exhibitors of motion pictures had an incentive to supply their audiences with the best show they could arrange and quickly learned that they needed someone who not only could market their product but also attract people to the show. During the first decade of cinema there was no one better at doing this than Komada Kōyō 駒田好洋.

When Jūmonji Daigen left the profession to focus on matters at his import

⁵⁷ Nomura 1926, p. 440. Very little is known about Sakata, including the correct pronunciation of his name: “Chikuma” or “Senkyoku.” Chikuma is written as both 千曲 and 千駒.

⁵⁸ Mizuno 1963b, p. 3. The film scholar Yoshida Chieo 吉田智恵男 suggests that it was only to be expected that a peddler would become flustered in the presence of such a great person as Napoleon. Yoshida 1978, p. 24.

company, he reportedly demanded that Komada Kōyō (Komada Manjirō 駒田万次郎, 1877–1935) replace him because he understood how to give good *setsumeimei*.⁵⁹ As the band director for the Hiromeya advertising company (which used *jinta* bands to promote the Vitascope), Komada had experience performing in front of an audience. Komada began working in motion pictures in 1897,⁶⁰ but it is unclear exactly when and how he became a *benshi*.⁶¹

One early reviewer had this to say about Komada:

For the two films *High Breakwater Waves* and *Poultry Raising* the *setsumeisha* 説明者 [*benshi*] made a special comment that these were the most admired works in the world and he was correct. Komada Kōyō provided the *setsumeimei*. His *setsumeimei* was *very, very* (頗る非常) truthful to the cinema, also funny, fluent, sarcastic, and without stops. The audience praised him *very, very* much. The reason why the audience was pleased was not because of the novelty of the machine, but because of Komada's brilliant *setsumeimei* which attracted many women and children. Komada's *setsumeimei* helped the audience understand the advancement of scientific information *very, very* much.⁶²

This quote, which appeared in a pamphlet about motion pictures published in 1897 or 1898, was reportedly excerpted from *Mainichi shinbun*; however, no such article appears in the newspaper. It seems likely that Komada Kōyō fabricated this positive review to promote himself and his show.

The above quote, with much tongue in cheek, uses the expression “very, very” (*sukoburu hijō* 頗る非常) three times in one short paragraph. This was Komada Kōyō's favorite expression, and he used it repeatedly in his *setsumeimei*. It was incorporated into his nickname, “The Very, Very Great Professor” 頗る非常大博士,⁶³ and served as a catch phrase to advertise his shows.⁶⁴ Komada even had the kanji 頗 printed on the haori he wore both on and off stage.

⁵⁹ Kobayashi 1933, p. 3–4.

⁶⁰ Komada 1934, p. 52.

⁶¹ The first *benshi* for the Cinématographe in Tokyo, Nakagawa Keiji, writes that several months after he became a *benshi* he fell ill and could not perform. Since there were no substitute *benshi*, others had to fill in. Nakagawa asserts that at first Akita Ryūkichi, the owner of Hiromeya and the man hired by Arai Saburō to advertise the Vitascope, tried his hand but failed. Komada Kōyō, a band director at Hiromeya, then took a turn and did *setsumeimei* in Nakagawa's place for three days. Nakagawa 1921d, p. 69. Unfortunately Nakagawa Keiji's account of these events is the only one available. No other primary sources indicate that Komada or the Hiromeya agency were connected with the Cinématographe. If Nakagawa's statements are correct, Jūmonji Daigen presumably worked as *benshi* for the Vitascope for several weeks and Arai Saburō likely headhunted the Hiromeya advertising company and Komada Kōyō away from the Cinématographe. It is possible, however, that Nakagawa fabricated this story so as to make people believe that he became a *benshi* long before Komada did. Nakagawa disliked his rival Komada, who was sometimes said to be the first *benshi*. “One thing I [Nakagawa] want you to remember is that Komada Kōyō made exaggerated advertisements and [falsely] asserted that he was the founder of motion pictures.” Nakagawa 1921c, p. 51.

⁶² *Katsudō shashin setsumeisho*, pp. 18–19.

⁶³ His full nickname was: “Above and Below Heaven the Self-righteous, Very, Very Great Professor” 天上天下唯我独尊頗る非常大博士.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Miyako shinbun* 1899; *Asahi shinbun* 1902; *Miyako shinbun* 1906.



Figure 5. Advertisement for a Komada Kōyō production. Item 6264 in the collection of the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum.

Like all founding *benshi*, Komada Kōyō took up *setsumeï* prior to the establishment of permanent theaters. Motion pictures were exhibited in rented theaters in large urban centers and in tents in outlying areas.⁶⁵ Within a few years of entering the business, Komada set up his own touring company.⁶⁶ Yokota Einosuke, the Yoshizawa company, and a few others also set up touring cinema troupes. The two dominant troupes during the initial decade, Yokota's and Komada's companies constantly competed with one another. Yokota's strength lay in the import of new films, but when it came to music, showmanship, and

⁶⁵ The first permanent theater built especially for motion pictures in Japan was the 240-seat Asakusa Denkikan 浅草電気館 theater in Tokyo, which opened the first week of October 1903. Japan's second movie theater, the Asakusa San'yūkan 浅草三友館, opened in 1907. In Great Britain, by comparison, the first theater devoted to cinema—the Balham Empire—opened in the summer of 1907. Low 1949, p. 15. The first theater built specifically for motion pictures in the United States opened in 1913—Nickelodeons were merely stores turned into theaters. Sklar 1994, p. 45.

⁶⁶ Komada must have gained complete control sometime between 1900–1902. In 1900 advertisements with the byline “Sponsored by Hiromeya” 会主広目屋本店 appeared; however, by 1902 that byline disappeared. *Miyako shinbun* 1900; *Asahi shinbun* 1902.

setsumei, Komada was the more powerful. Komada, who provided *setsumei* as well as producing and marketing his shows, was also more directly involved in the actual exhibitions. Yokota, by contrast, soon moved away from such aspects to concentrate on the import and production of films.

As Komada traveled around exhibiting motion pictures, he often incorporated local dialect into his *setsumei* to add to the appeal of his performance. He also performed in Western dress, which was still unusual in the outer regions of the country. In addition to attracting people to his shows with his dapper style and skilled *setsumei*, Komada also acquired a number of disciples, all of whom used the kanji 洋, “overseas,” in their stage names. In 1900, long before the glorious years of *benshi*, Komada made the profession appear so glamorous that one young person, the son of a hotel owner, went so far as to cut off his finger to demonstrate the intensity of his desire to become Komada’s disciple. The boy’s dream of becoming a *benshi* was short-lived, however, as two months later his parents dragged him back to the hotel.⁶⁷

Komada put on traveling exhibitions throughout the Meiji and Taishō periods. In 1924 he retired from the touring cinema business after twenty-seven years and invested all of his savings in his new foreign film import company, Sekai Films セカイフィルム. During the Meiji era Komada’s unsurpassed ability to draw audiences led to the saying: “Komada Kōyō in the east, Ueda Hoteiken in the west.”⁶⁸ In earlier years, however, he faced an even more exotic rival.

When Jūmonji Daigen appeared on stage to give *setsumei* for Arai Saburō’s Vitascope, he was not alone. He was joined by Daniel Grim Krouse, a twenty-eight-year-old from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who had come with one of Edison’s Vitascope to Japan. Krouse likely made the journey for the same reason that François Girel accompanied the Lumières’ Cinématographe: he came on the pretext of helping with projection, but his real function was to keep an eye on the books. While the Lumières routinely sent out an “operator” with each of their machines to help with the initial exhibition and act as an accountant, Edison did not. Why he did in this case is a bit of a mystery.

During most of Arai’s early Vitascope exhibitions, Daniel Krouse stood on the stage and explained how the Kinetoscope had evolved into the Vitascope. He also discussed the “inventor of the machine,” Thomas Edison, and the content of the films. Although he spoke English, a number of foreigners and educated Japanese in the audience were presumably able to understand what he said. For those who could not, Jūmonji Daigen reportedly provided a translation in addition to his own *setsumei*.

Of all the first *benshi*, Krouse is the only one whose name appears in contemporaneous sources as such. In 1897 and 1898 advertisements for the Vitascope routinely ran with the byline, “Technician and *Benshi*, the American Scientist: Mr. Teni [sic] Krouse.”⁶⁹ Exploiting Krouse’s exotic appeal, Arai also

⁶⁷ Kobayashi 1933, p. 130.

⁶⁸ Mizuno 1937, p. 71.

⁶⁹ See, for example, *Chūō shinbun* 1898a; *Chūō shinbun* 1898b; *Miyako shinbun* 1897d.

featured his name on predebut announcements for the Vitascope: “The American scientist Daniel Krouse, who is both a technician and a provider of *setsumei*, will present the latest great electrical invention, the motion picture machine, from 6 March at the Kanda Kinkikan.”⁷⁰ Just by being himself—a Westerner living in Japan—Daniel Krouse helped establish the place of *benshi* in Japanese cinema. His popularity demonstrated that an individual possessing a certain allure standing next to the screen could more than pay for himself by enticing people into the theater.

Entrepreneurs initially hired *benshi* to explain the foreign exotica contained within the films and to help make motion pictures into an entertaining show. They discovered that skilled *benshi* were also effective marketers and a draw in themselves. As one writer put it, “for many people the *benshi*’s *setsumei* is the biggest attraction.”⁷¹ Some *benshi* drew customers with their erudite wit, others with their salaciousness; some with the poetic beauty of their words, others with their dream-like voices. While different *benshi* appealed to audiences for different reasons, they were a key factor in the success or failure of a particular production. Among a certain segment of Japanese silent cinema fans, the issue often was not going to see such-and-such film but to hear such-and-such *benshi*; that is, they chose the theater based not on what was showing, but on who provided the *setsumei*.⁷² Fans of certain *benshi* went to the same movie house several times a week to listen to their idol *setsumei* the same film. If moviegoers did not like the *benshi* performing at the theater where a movie opened, they would wait until the film moved to another theater where a *benshi* whom they liked performed. The importance to movie houses of having good *setsumei* consolidated the position of *benshi*.⁷³

⁷⁰ *Hōchi shinbun* 1897. Daniel Krouse was not the only occidental *benshi*. During the late Meiji and early Taishō period a Westerner by the name of Henry James Black (1858–1923) also on occasion worked as a *benshi*. The Australian-born Black spent much of his childhood in Japan, and in 1878, much to the chagrin of his family and friends, decided to become an entertainer there. He tried his hand at various performing arts before settling down to become a *rakugoka* 落語家. In 1891 he assumed the professional *rakugo* name Kairakutei 快樂亭 and for more than a decade was a popular *rakugo* storyteller. Performing in Japanese, he introduced his audiences to Western culture and literature through his *rakugo* tales. By the turn of the century, young rivals within the *rakugo* world who resented a foreigner in their midst had, for all intents and purposes, forced Black out of the profession. After he stopped performing *rakugo* on a regular basis he occasionally worked as a *benshi*. At a time when most *benshi* were not advertised by name, Black’s often appeared in newspaper advertisement bylines. Even at the end of the Meiji period a foreigner was still an attraction. Advertisements for Black working at the Patēkan パテー館 theater first appeared in *Miyako shinbun* on 30 January 1912, and they appeared regularly over the next several months. For information on Henry (Kairakutei) Black as a *rakugo* performer, see Morioka and Sasaki 1983; Morioka and Sasaki 1990. *Katsudō zasshi* reported that on 15 January 1922, “an English-speaking foreigner provided *setsumei* for a Pathe film in English and that the audience loved him.” Who this foreign *benshi* was and the background to his performance are not known. *Katsudō zasshi* 1922a.

⁷¹ Shūhō 1910, p. 204.

⁷² Fukumen Inshi 1918; Sudzuky 1929; Lindstrom 1931; Ōkura 1959, pp. 86, 210; Watanabe 1961, p. 29; Furuya 1978, p. 24; Yoshida 1978, p. 3; Itō 1984, p. 34.

⁷³ Theater entrepreneurs also tried other means of drawing audiences. During the late Meiji and early Taishō period, the Sennichimae Denkikan 大阪千日前電気館 in Osaka tried to attract cus-

Benshi as Social Educators

As touched on above, early *benshi* sometimes discussed the invention and mechanics of motion pictures. Shortly after viewing the Cinématographe in 1897 Raidai Kamezō 来代亀蔵 wrote, “A *benshi* came out and provided *setsumei*. ‘The French scientist Shireto [Girel?] invented the Cinématographe—the most modern illusion—which electrically moves three hundred photographs per minute.’”⁷⁴ While the *setsumei*—or Raidai’s understanding of it—was wrong about both the inventor of the apparatus and its speed (the machine moved well over three hundred photographs per minute),⁷⁵ the episode points up another dimension of the role of the *benshi*: educating the public. All early films shown in Japan were made in the West and usually depicted an aspect of everyday life, such as workers leaving a factory, a building on fire, men wrestling, or people walking down a city street. Since there were many particulars about Western customs, manners, history, traditions, and culture that Japanese spectators did not understand, *benshi* took on the role of social educators. During one initial exhibition in which the film *The Czar’s Arrival in Paris* was shown, for example, the *benshi* taught the audience that the ruler was not the man in the superior position on the roof but the one inside the carriage.⁷⁶ A comparable example was Ueda Hoteiken’s explanation of the social importance of kissing in the West, which helped forestall the police from prohibiting the showing of the risqué film *The Kiss*.

Some *benshi* took the occasion to impress their own views of the subject upon the audience. For a movie depicting Thomas Edison watering his garden, Jūmonji Daigen reportedly gave the following *setsumei*: “What is going to be projected next is *Watering by the Great Inventor Edison*. He is a great man who even waters his own garden and does not have someone else do it. Labor is a divine thing. People should not despise labor.”⁷⁷

Although it is impossible to calculate the extent to which Jūmonji Daigen, Ueda Hoteiken, and other *benshi* influenced Japanese perceptions about the West, throughout the silent era the role of educator would be a key function of the *benshi*. In 1909, the *benshi* Eda Fushiki, who apprenticed under Ueda Hoteiken, wrote, “*Benshi* must be cognizant of the fact that they are social educators (*shakai no kyōikusha* 社会の教育者). . . . Now that I am a *benshi*, I try to give morally upright *setsumei*: *setsumei* with an educational value.”⁷⁸ By 1917 one writer

tomers by filling the theater with perfume, serving free tea, and providing umbrellas on rainy days. In Germany, during World War I, some theater managers advertised that they would give out butter to everyone who attended their show. “The Germans seem to appreciate the butter more than the cinema,” commented one Japanese critic. Mizutani 1964; *Kinema record* 1916b.

⁷⁴ Raidai 1897.

⁷⁵ Three hundred frames per minute equals five frames per second, which is far too slow to create the illusion of movement. Early motion pictures were usually projected at a speed of about sixteen frames per second.

⁷⁶ Anderson and Richie 1982, p. 24.

⁷⁷ Onoda 1926, p. 161.

⁷⁸ Eda 1909, p. 8.

compared the importance of *benshi* as social educators with that of teachers as school educators and fathers as family educators.⁷⁹ A few years later, one editorial went so far as to say that *benshi* were more influential than schoolteachers because they educated more of the public than teachers did.⁸⁰ The financial success of the best-known *benshi* corroborates their social importance. At the beginning of the Taishō period, when day laborers earned fifty-nine sen a day, first year elementary school teachers earned twenty yen per month, and bankers began their careers earning only forty yen per month, top *benshi* earned several hundred yen a month.⁸¹ The popularity of *benshi* and their impact as social educators so worried the Japanese government that it tried, with limited success, to regulate their activities through laws directed specifically at them.⁸²

When Meiji entrepreneurs first introduced motion pictures into Japan, they faced stiff competition from traditional performing arts and other Western technological imports. But by the beginning of the Taishō period motion pictures had become the dominant form of mass entertainment in Japan. This preeminence—one that the industry would maintain until television surpassed it in the late 1960s and early 1970s—was due in considerable measure to the *benshi* who helped market the product to the public and whose personality and *setsumei* attracted people to the cinema. The importance of the role of the *benshi* in the establishment of the cinema in Japan ensured them an incontestable position in the Japanese silent film experience. Audiences became so accustomed and attached to *benshi*, so used to watching the screen while simultaneously listening to the separate *setsumei* that they found it difficult to enjoy a film without them. There from the start, *benshi* would remain an integral component of Japanese silent cinema until the very end. In fact, because of *benshi* the silent film era lasted substantially longer in Japan than elsewhere, as the *benshi*'s poetic rhetoric continued to emanate from Japanese movie houses up until the eve of the Pacific War.

The first *benshi* came from diverse backgrounds, ranging from politically ambitious youths who had traveled abroad to street peddlers who hawked toothbrushes. What they all had in common was a willingness to try new things. Although many quickly left the profession, they alike helped to establish the precedent of attaching a vocal narrative element to cinema. The ultimate result was transformation of the medium into a commingled form of theater with a distinctively Japanese coloration. For Japanese cinema history this would prove to be the founding *benshi*'s most significant legacy.

⁷⁹ Kishi 1917, p. 324.

⁸⁰ *Katsudō zasshi* 1923, p. 70.

⁸¹ *Shūkan asahi* 1982, vol. 3, p. 235; vol. 2, p. 19; vol. 3, p. 69; Dym 1998, pp. 150–56.

⁸² Dym 1998, pp. 187–246; Gerow 1996, pp. 209–29.

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