# Commingled Art and Commingled Culture: The Benshi and 19th Century Japanese Film Culture

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**KEYWORDS**

Benshi; Silent Cinema; Co-Mingled Media; Meiji Restoration; Japanese Film.

**ABSTRACT**

From 1896, when the first Kinetoscope was brought to Japan, to the early 1920s, all film screenings were accompanied by a live Japanese narrator called the *benshi*.[1] *Benshi* stood to the left of the film screen and—speaking in melodious rhythms—provided narration, character impersonation, explanation of western exotica, and offered general commentary and critique for the then silent films.[2] In late ninteenth-century Japan, film was not seen as an autonomous medium but rather as "commingled" media, comprised of vocal storytelling and projected motion pictures.[3] This was in part due to long-standing Japanese theatrical traditions such as temple and itinerant *etoki*, the Japanese Buddhist practice in which monks use picture scrolls to expound Buddhist principles.[4] *Benshi* performers drew upon such theatrical heritage to describe the foreign film

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[1] Hideaki Fujiki, *Making Personas: Transnational Film Stardom in Modern Japan*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 6. https://doi.org/10.1163/9781684170630

[2] Ibid., 34; Jeffrey A. Dym, "Benshi and the Introduction of Motion Pictures to Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 55, no.4 (2000): 511, https://doi.org/10.2307/2668250.

[3] Joseph L. Anderson, "Spoken Silents in the Japanese Cinema, Essay on the Necessity of Katsuben," *Journal of Film and Video* 40, no.1 (1998): 13, Http://www.jstor.org/stable/20687801.

[4] Ibid., 15.

apparatus, thereby fragmenting the filmic system of representation and instilling a distinct culture of critical independence in Japanese silent film audiences.[5]

This essay contributes to scholarly debates regarding "commingled" media, the juxtaposition of heterogeneous media, which is reflective of unique Japanese artistic culture.[6] It provides a case study of *Benshi* Tokugawa Musei's performance of the 1920 silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene) recorded at the Kinokuniya Hall in Tokyo in 1968.[7] This remaining work by Tokugawa Musei, a renowned *benshi* of the silent film era, offers insight into interactions between the *benshi* and silent film as it relates to Japanese traditions of "commingled" media.

The Edo period in Japan was one of self-imposed isolation; however, the Meiji era, in which cinema made its debut, is characterized as being a key moment in Japan's history of westernization. Japanese methods of filmmaking and screening western films, including *benshi,* were representative of Japanese artistic heritage, but were not valued by the ever-modernizing Meiji-era urban Japanese citizens. While processes of globalization had the power to bring American technology to Japan, and Japanese dignitaries to the west, the Japanese cinematic art resulting from international innovation required translation back into the cinematic language of the dominant economic forces to obtain national and international acclaim. This paper aims to

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5 Aaron Andrew Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face: Defining Cinema in Taishô Japan," *ICONICS-International Studies of the Modern Image* 3 (1994): 71,78, https://doi.org/10.18917/iconics.3.0_69.

6 Anderson, "Spoken Silents in Japanese Cinema,"18.

7 "Karigari-Hakase (Dr. Caligari). Sound Recording at Kinokuniya Hall in Tokyo, 1968." *Comparative Japanese Film Archive*, 2min, KINO Film International, Clip created at Hamilton College, 2011. https://cjf.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/cjf%3A118?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=0452f76fe2dd7c87d67f&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=19.

connect innovation in film through “commingled” media to initiatives of the Meiji government, showing how the external and internal pressure of westernization manifested in Japanese film culture.

Silent films in late 19th century Japan were not silent. In Japan, early film was a commingled media comprising unscripted vocal storytelling by *benshi* alongside projected motion pictures rather than an autonomous medium.[8] Beginning when the first kinetoscope was brought to Japan in 1896 up until the early 1920s, all film screenings in Japan were accompanied by a live Japanese narrator called *benshi*.[9] *Benshi* performers stood in the shadows providing vocal narration drawing upon Japanese theatrical heritage such as *etoki*.[10] The *benshi* stood to the left of the film screen and—speaking in melodious rhythms—provided narration, character impersonation, explanations of western exotica, and gave general commentary and critique for the silent films.[11] These performers would fragment the filmic system of representation and instill a distinct culture of critical independence in audiences.[12] Cinema that developed out of western photographic study of motion was imported into Japanese artistic culture and integrated into long-standing Japanese performance traditions, despite new Meiji era regulations surrounding westernization.[13] Well-known *benshi* of the silent era Tokugawa Musei's 1968 performance of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), as archived in the digital archive "*Benshi*: Silent Film Narrators in Japan," evidences this practice. However, after the Meiji Restoration the formerly closed country of Japan moved towards western-style modernization.

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[8] Anderson, "Spoken Silents in Japanese Cinema," 13.

[9] Ibid., 16; Fujiki, *Making Personas*, 6.

[10] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 71, 78.

[11] Ibid., 34; Dym, "Benshi and the Introduction of Motion Pictures to Japan," 511.

[12] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 71, 78.

[13] Anderson, "Spoken Silents in Japanese Cinema," 15.

Therefore, *benshi* became a barrier to international critical reception and economic success for Japanese filmmakers, who sought global acclaim, in line with government directives and cultural interest in modernization. *Benshi* were simultaneously representative of Japanese historical, artistic, and cultural traditions while being physically limiting for filmmakers whose films relied on *benshi* narration to show internationally. Likewise, film critics of this period, belatedly coined the "pure film movement," valorized western perspectives of identity, authorship, originality, and modes of representation. Proponents of this movement, expressed dissatisfaction with Japanese productions, claiming that Japanese films were inferior to foreign pictures in their use of cinematography, props and dramatic construction.[14] This essay attends to the nearly lost tradition of *benshi* performance by inspecting their abandonment in the interests of westernization and commodification and the consequences of commercialization on Japanese artistic traditions of "commingled" media. It aims to address how *benshi*, a distinctly Japanese artistic innovation, went from omnipresent in Japanese film culture to being widely condemned by Japanese critics within ten years. Further, it connects innovations in film through "commingled" media – the unification of discrete media – to initiatives of the Meiji government. In doing so, it demonstrates the external and internal pressure of westernization that manifests in Japanese film culture.

Film as a technological invention originated from motion photography, and since its inception, cinema as art and a form of entertainment has been closely aligned with global markets. Humans have desired to create motion pictures for millennia. Magic lantern shows in France awed audiences of the 1870s with many glass slides positioned and moved to depict the movement of

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[14] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 94.

waves swelling and flowers blooming.[15] These moving pictures could be found worldwide and were brought to Japan by Dutch traders, where they became known as *utsushi-e*, meaning "projected pictures." In the 19th century, magic lantern shows were integrated into Japan's artistic heritage under this new name, as were later motion picture technologies.[16] In 1878, photographer Eadweard Muybridge expanded upon the depiction of motion with magic lantern shows with his Zoopraxiscope project.[17] Muybridge used a tripwire to produce a series of consecutive images, which he then displayed in swift succession, resulting in the depiction of several seconds of what appeared to be a horse galloping.[18] This illusion of motion relies on the principle of the persistence of vision in which the human brain perceives the illusion of movement when images are presented continuously.[19] With this technology and the understanding of the persistence of vision, early filmmakers combined camera, projector, film manufacturing, and, later, sound recording. Soon, early western filmmakers envisioned the economic possibilities of cinema. The mass distribution of motion pictures became both a highly profitable business and a new artistic medium that spread worldwide, including in Japan. Japan's Meiji Restoration of 1868 was a regime change and the largest cultural, social, and political revolution that Japan had undergone since the year 645.[20] The preceding Edo period in Japan was one of self-imposed isolation under the Tokugawa shogunate.

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[15] Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *A Short History of Film*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 2.

[16] Anderson, "Spoken Silents in Japanese Cinema," 15.

[17] Dixon and Foster, *A Short History of Film*, 2.

[18] Ibid., 4.

[19] Ibid., 1.

[20] Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art,* (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005), 343; W. Puck Brecher, "Useless Losers: Marginality and Modernization in Early Meiji Japan," *The European Legacy* 17 no. 6 (2012): 804, https://doi-org/10.1080/10848770.2012.715811.

However, the following Meiji era, in which cinema made its debut, is characterized as being a key moment in Japan's history of westernization. During the early 19$^{th}$ century, the trading ports of Japan saw During the early nineteenth-century, the trading ports of Japan saw the arrival of boats from Britain, Russia, and the United States.[21] In the summer of 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States arrived in Edo Bay, Tokyo, with a squadron of "black ships."[22] Sent by President Fillmore, Perry approached Japan's harbour intending to establish a trading relationship; in 1854, a Treaty of Friendship was signed providing an exchange of consular officials between Japan and the United States. This contact marked a turning point for Japan regarding its relationship with western powers. Shortly after, in January 1863, the anti-shogunate *shishi* overthrew the *bakufu* military government and deposed the Tokugawa shogun, placing the seventeen-year-old emperor Meiji in power.[23] This was a new, pro-modern and pro-western era which elevated modernization and disparaged the past and those who upheld it. The Meiji government implemented significant changes, such as jettisoning the anti-foreigner policy in favour of westernization, propelling the development of Japanese cinema.[24]

In the late nineteenth through early twentieth-centuries, after retracting its isolationist policies, Japan became part of the global economic system of trade. The interconnected ideologies, policies, and practices of globalization support the flow of capital.[25] The evolution of cinema as a technology and art form can be aligned with processes of globalization, with cinema as

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[21] H. Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture,* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 237.

[22] Ibid., 235.

[23] Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 343.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

a form of capital; film is both traded and critiqued internationally with western iterations of cinema typically upheld as the exemplar of sophistication and evolution.[26] This modern, international system of trade, as developed by Western Europe and the United States and promoted by the Meiji and Taisho, was adopted by Japan as a means of survival as a sovereign nation.[27]

Between 1871 and 1873, powerful officials of the Meiji Restoration travelled from Japan to Europe on the Iwakura Mission to acquire knowledge of western statecraft and economic development.[28] Likewise, the government encouraged student travel abroad to obtain an international education.[29] Through the civilization and enlightenment (*bummer kaka*) policy, many students were sponsored for education overseas, including art education, with the understanding that they would return to Japan with new ideas and experiences with new technological innovations. Furthermore, the Meiji government invited foreign scholars to chair departments in the newly westernized Japanese universities to educate a generation of students according to modern western teaching methods and subject matter.[30]

Film stood as a symbol of western advancement and as a pedagogical tool that could proliferate western customs and ideas among Japanese citizens.[31] Kyoto businessman Inabata

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[26] Donald Preziosi, "Globalization and its Discontents," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 404.

[27] Brecher, "Useless Losers," 804.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 344.

[30] Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 344.

[31] Aaron Andrew Gerow, "The Motion Pictures as a Problem," in *Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation, and Spectatorship, 1895-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 42, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp07h.6.

Katsutaro (1862-1949) brought film technology to Japan in early 1897.[32] Inabata had studied abroad at La Martinière technical school in Lyon, France, where one of his classmates had been August Lumière, of the famous Lumière brothers.[33] In the same year, Japan produced its first film, establishing the country's long and rich tradition of filmmaking.[34] Thomas Edison's mass production methods were soon undertaken by Japan. Using his Hollywood business model, Japanese filmmakers produced a large number of films during the silent era, approximately 400 films in the year 1931.[35]

In Japanese, motion pictures or moving pictures literally translates to *katsudo shashin.*[36] However, motion pictures were often referred to as *misemono,* meaning entertainment, leaving film linguistically undistinguished from other forms of entertainment such as *utushi-e* magic lantern shows or *etoki* Buddhist didactic picture-scroll performances.[37] While *misemono* directly translates to entertainment, the term also refers to art forms with pedagogical elements. The naming of motion pictures as *misemono,* rather than the direct translation *katsudo shashin,* demonstrates how motion pictures became integrated into Japanese performance history and culture. Further, it indicates the broadening of the definition of *misemono* to include the emerging media of film as a form of leisure. This leisure pursuit is associated with modernity that grew out of the Industrial

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[32] Kenichiro Hase, "Reconsidering Katsutaro Inabata's Cinematograph Business in Japan: Based on the Newly Discovered 'Four Letters by Katsutaro Inabata to Lumière Brothers (1897),'" *Eizogaku* 104 (2020): 61. https://doi.org/10.18917/eizogaku.104.0_51.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Dixon and Foster, *A Short History of Film*, 86.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Gerow, "The Motion Pictures as a Problem," 47.

[37] Ibid.

Revolution and became a continuation of Japanese performance history.[38] Although films in Japan functioned as commodities and sites of leisure, much like in the west, the unique historical context of Japan set its cinema apart from contemporaneous western cinema as is evidenced by the name *misemono.*[39] Furthermore, *benshi* stand as a key difference and demonstrate how early Japanese cinema was comprised of imported western technology yet remained connected to Japanese artistic traditions of "commingled" media and oral storytelling.

In his work *To the Distant Observer,* Noel Burch regards early Japanese film as being part of an unbroken lineage with earlier Japanese performance histories.[40] Japanese commingled media, as seen in *benshi* performance alongside film, can be connected to *etoki* performances dating back to the tenth century.[41] *Etoki* is a Japanese Buddhist practice in which monks use picture scrolls to explain Buddhist principles. *E* means picture in Japanese and *toki* means deciphering.[42] There are two distinct styles of *etoki*: didactic temple *etoki* is performed by clergy in major Buddhist monasteries, and itinerant *etoki* is performed by missionaries in public spaces.[43] The first reference to the itinerant tradition is seen in the thirteenth century, indicating that it stems from the temple tradition.[44] *Etoki* shared stories that supported a Buddhist worldview and stood as

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[38] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 99.

[39] Ibid., 71.

[40] Ibid., 99.

[41] Anderson, "Spoken Silents in Japanese Cinema," 13.

[42] Ikumi Kaminishi, "Etoki, or Deciphering Pictures, of Buddhist Propaganda," *Word & Image* 18, no.2 (2002): 191.

[43] Ikumi Kaminishi, "Etoki in History," in *Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvmxpt.5.

[44] Ibid.

one of the most effective ways to proselytize faith to lower strata of society, as well as to people in remote regions.[45]

In *etoki,* neither the image nor the speech is representative of the full story, the image is deciphered through narration. Importantly, *etoki* has two meanings simultaneously: elucidations *of* picture and elucidation *by* picture.[46] Just as early Japanese film commingles performance and motion picture technology, *etoki* commingles performance, verbal narration, music, and visual art. Contemporary western logocentric semiotic study of text and image subordinates image to text in the hierarchy of signs.[47] However, *etoki* has a tripartite significance where the distinct elements of performance, the performer, and the painting combine to create a new text.[48] In semiotic terms, these three signs relate to each other and, when juxtaposed, transform the text as a whole through a distinct mode of signification.[49] The tripartite relationship represented in *etoki*, is a structure rooted in Japanese artistic heritage. It is also evidenced in the relationship between *benshi* and film; much like the elucidation of image in *etoki*, the *benshi* transformed the films they presented into entirely new texts through their performance. The film, like the picture scroll, is translated by the *benshi.* Thus, viewers are presented with the process of transparent translation through performance.[50] In this way, a new text is created, comprised of simultaneous film and live performance.

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[45] Kaminishi, "Etoki, or Deciphering Pictures," 191.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid,192.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

Temple *etoki* takes place to this day. For example, Abbot Ono No Jokan continues to tell the illustrated legend of Dojoji, known by its folklore title Anchin and Kiuohime (Fig. 1).[51] The oldest version of the picture scroll upon which this *etoki* is based dates before 1573 but is assumed to have been copied from a fourteenth-century original.[52] In this story, as depicted on the picture scroll, love-crazed Kiyohime pines for the ascetic monk Anchin. Due to her unrequited love, as depicted on the picture scroll, she transforms into a serpent. Kiyohime then chases the monk to Dojoji, who hides in the temple bell. The serpent wraps herself around the bell, breathing fire and destroying them both.[53] This story initially appears unrelated to Buddhism; however, Abbot Ono No Jokan iterates Buddhist principles through the oratory elements of *etoki* within his interpretation. He asserts that Anchin represents earthly desire, which prohibits her from reaching enlightenment.[54] The picture scrolls themselves are based on literary texts and elucidate the written word. This example of "commingled" media dating back to the tenth-century evidences historical processes of inter-media transformation.

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[51] Kaminishi, "Etoki in History," 19.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Kaminishi, "Etoki, or Deciphering Pictures," 119.

[54] Ibid.

**FIGURE 1.** ***Musumi Dojo-ji*****. (From Dojo-Ji Engi-Emaki "The Maiden at Dojoji Temple"). Set of two handscrolls; ink and colour on paper. Vol 1:12 X 417 3/16 in (31.5 x 1060 cm) Vol 2:12 X 426 1/4 in (31.5 x 1084 cm) Muromachi Period, c.15th or 16th century. Wakayama Prefecture, Japan.**
Source: Wikimedia Commons

In his essay "Spoken Silents in The Japanese Cinema, Essay on The Necessity of Katsuben," Joseph L. Anderson defines "commingled media" in Japanese art and performance as the bringing together of heterogeneous and redundant elements in complex relationships.

Along with performances of commingled media such as *etoki*, the Meiji Restoration created the conditions for commingling of western and Japanese culture. The Meiji Restoration brought a swift influx of western media and ideas into Japan which were assimilated into contemporary and historical traditions. Innovations were brought to public spaces in Japanese cities such as tram cars, electrical wiring, western-style commercial street signs and western dress. However, within their homes, people continued to be floor-based with tatami-matted environs.[55] Much like in film, this hybrid western and Japanese style was common. Notably, when the Meiji government retracted slightly from its strict modernization policy by 1880, there was a rediscovery

[55] Mason, *History of Japanese Art,* 344.

of Japanese culture where traditional Japanese and new western objects and ideas were made hybrid.[56] It is in this context that the *benshi* was developed, with this commingling of culture.

In film, the tendency of bringing together heterogenous elements is manifested in the relationship between the *benshi* and the motion picture they present. Representational labour was split between presentational image and representational voice.[57] The text of the film—comprising actors, sets, music and other prerecorded components—is extended off screen by the *benshi* through live narration and performance. *Benshi* performance fragments the filmic system of representation ; the narratorial voice of the film does not exist only on screen, but is expanded outside the original text through live storytelling. In this way, *benshi* performance made Japanese silent films distinct from other national cinemas that presented film without a live extra-textual narrator. The *benshi* splits the narratorial voice and assumes a narrative function thereby freeing the film itself from being a narrative text and making viewers aware that they are being presented a text that can be interpreted.[58] At the time, western critics asserted that viewers of Japanese cinema were unable to succumb to the fictional world of the text and were forced to acknowledge their role as the viewers of a spectacle, thereby diminishing the storytelling power of the film.[59] This was significant for production companies as it stripped them of narrative control, leaving the *benshi* with the power to reshape and interpret the film they presented. This newly created text became

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Sybil Thornton, "Review: To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema by Noel Burch, Annette Michelson," *Cinema Journal* 21, no. 1 (1981): 60, https://doi.org/10.2307/1225004.

[58] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 71.

[59] Ibid.

part of Japanese artistic heritage even though the technology, and oftentimes the films themselves, were western.

In Japan, early film was not an autonomous medium, but commingled media comprised of both performance and visual art. *Benshi* played a central role in cinema and playhouse culture, and were considered responsible for maximizing the theatre-going experience.[60] *Benshi* influenced the creation of Japanese films, in that filmmakers often relied on *benshi* narration to convey plot and dialogue.[61] The *benshi* was autonomous from the film and worked to create tension with the images on the screen.[62] For example, *benshi* frequently created narratives that were distinct from the film's plot. This was popular among audiences and Japanese film historians assert that by 1903 the *benshi* was one of the primary incentives to attract audiences to screenings.[63] *Benshi* were the first Japanese film stars.Their popularity peaked during the 1910s, with many *benshi* receiving higher pay than the film stars themselves.[64]Audiences would often decide which film to see based on which *benshi* was performing that evening.[65]

At the height of their popularity, it was not uncommon for *benshi* to criticize the film they were presenting thereby encouraging audiences' critical interrogation of the film.[66] As audiences watched the *benshi* perform, they became aware that the *benshi* was actively interpreting the film's

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[60] Fujiki, *Making Personas*, 35.

[61] Ibid., 34.

[62] Ibid., 33.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Kerim Yasar, "Sound and Motion," in *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 197, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/yasa18712.12.197.

[65] Fujiki, *Making Personas*, 6.

[66] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 78.

narrative. This awareness opened up the possibility for audiences to engage critically with the texts themselves, realizing that—like the *benshi*—they too could question, interpret, and critique the film's meaning. This dynamic fostered a distinct culture of critical independence among viewers which opposed the agendas of both the Japanese film industry and the Meiji government. Firstly, the Japanese film industry opposed *benshi* performances that destabilized the meaning of films by creating diverging meanings. Soon filmmakers noticed that a film's meaning could be made entirely different depending on which *benshi* performance. [67] Therefore, not only did producers not have control over their filmic products, but purchasing decisions were based on which *benshi* was working rather than which film was being screened. [68] To eliminate divergent interpretations, film studios began supplying texts that *benshi* were instructed to recite. In this way, filmmakers attempted to reclaim control over their creative output.[69]

The second power that opposed *benshi* performance was the Japanese Meiji government. The rise of *benshi* performance coincided with Meiji modernization policies restricting traditional Japanese art forms.[70] To the modernizing Japanese government *benshi* were not viewed as being a source of national pride but rather as evidence of an archaic past. In 1917, *benshi* performance was regulated under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and the Home Ministry. From that point forward, *benshi* were required to be licensed enabling further government control.[71] *Benshi* institutionalization allowed the government to shift the *benshi*'s role from performers,

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., 83.

[69] Ibid., 78.

[70] Gerow, "The Motion Pictures as a Problem," 47.

[71] Fujiki, *Making Personas*, 24, 32.

entertainers, and critics to educators and unobtrusive narrators.[72] Whereas the Japanese film industry did not want *benshi* to alter the meaning of their films, it was the state's goal for the *benshi* to alter a film's meaning in the government's favour.[73] Police frequently censored the scripts given to *benshi* by filmmakers and were even stationed in each cinema to ensure *benshi* complied with regulations.[74] To accomplish their goal of transforming *benshi* from a performer to a state educator, after 1921 *benshi* were required to take a written exam.[75] The name *benshi* was changed to *setsumeisha*, meaning "explainer," further reinforcing that their role was to supplement the filmic text rather than to create something new.[76]

Ongoing digital archival work, including Dr. Kyoko Omori's project "*Benshi*: Silent Film Narrators in Japan," focuses on preserving the culture and history of *benshi* performance through the online publication of digitized audio and video clips. Few examples of *benshi* performance remain. However, *benshi* Tokugawa Musei's performance of the 1920 German silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* archived in Dr. Omori's project, stands as a case study for Japanese film as commingled media. This film includes music and explanatory title cards along with Tokugawa's oration, which was recorded at the Kinokuniya Hall in Tokyo in 1968.[77] There are three distinct eras of *benshi* performance: the silent film era from 1900 to 1930, the nostalgic era from 1940 to

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 83

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., 79.

[77] Ibid.

1980, and the contemporary era from 1990 to the present.[78] While Tokugawa Musei's performance of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is temporally part of the nostalgic era of the *benshi*, Tokugawa was well-known during the silent era.[79] In fact, a newspaper column in 1927 dedicated to cinema in Japan listed Tokugawa Musei as one of the most notable *benshi* in Japan and his name appears on banzuke ranking charts of these famous performers (Fig. 2).[80] However, when sound film took over from silent film, leaving many *benshi* unemployed, Tokugawa continued working as an orator and actor. While few *benshi* performances are digitized today, through Omori's careful archival work Tokugawa's work is still available and can be viewed as a case study for a silent-era *benshi* performance.

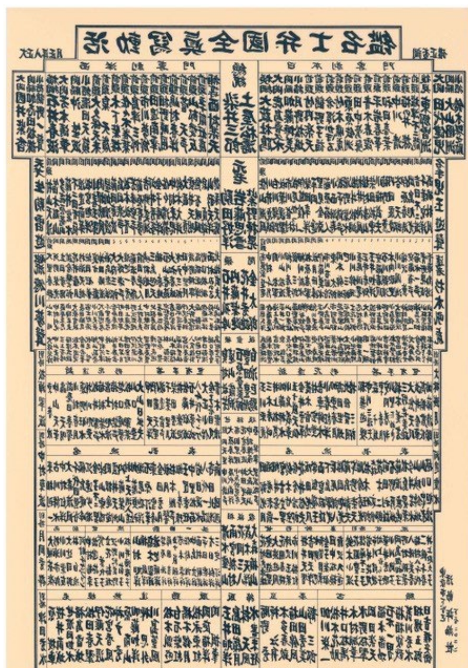

**FIGURE 2** ***Benshi Chart ranking top performers, including Tokugawa Musei [1919].*** **Japan. Digital image, 2011.** Source: Comparative Japanese Film Archive, Hamilton College, New York. Courtesy of Matsuda Film Productions.

[78] Jeffrey Dym, "About Japan: A Teacher's Resource: A Brief History of Benshi (Silent FilmNarrators)" *Japan Society,* accessed November 9, 2023, https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/a_brief_history_of_benshi.

[79] See Figure 2.

[80] Fujiki, *Making Personas,* 77.

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is a silent horror film characteristic of German Expressionist cinema. The narration of the German film by a Japanese *benshi* speaks to the international confluences in film during this era. Told in six acts, the film begins with the protagonist Francis sitting on a bench beside another man to whom he relates his suffering. The remainder of the film is a flashback in which an asylum director whom audiences know as Dr. Caligari, becomes obsessed with a mythical monk from whom he derived his name. Subsequently, Dr. Caligari begins studying hypnotism and brainwashes Cesare the Somnambulist to commit a series of murders in his sleep. During the fifth act of the film, when Francis discovers Dr. Caligari's secret identity, viewers are shown a flashback scene within a flashback scene. This is the climax of the film and one of three scenes digitized by Dr. Kyoko Omori and performed by Tokugawa Musei.

Central themes, such as unstable psychological states and obsession in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* are mirrored in the unconventional angular sets and in props adorned with painted light and shadow which create the illusion of distorted perspective (Fig. 3). These themes are reiterated in Tokugawa Musei's *benshi* performance. Tokugawa fluidly combines the roles of narrator and voice actor in tandem, demonstrating the typical *benshi* style. The climactic scene from the fifth act of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* begins as Tokugawa narrates Dr. Caligari's actions and then seamlessly switches to voice acting as Dr. Caligari (Fig. 4). He does not alter his voice or intonation but uses a pause to indicate that he has switched from narrating to impersonating. Pausing again, Tokugawa begins talking directly to Dr. Caligari addressing him as "you."[81] In this moment,

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[81] Robert Wiene (dir.), *Karigari-Hakase (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari),* sound recording with Benshi narration by Tokugawa Musei (New York: Kino Film International, 2002), 1 min. 39 sec., Comparative Japanese Film Archive, Hamilton College Ontario. https://cjf.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/cjf%3A118?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=0452f76fe2dd7c87d67f&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=19.

Tokugawa draws attention to his extra-textual voice that illuminates Dr. Caligari's obsessed and possessed disposition. Immediately after Tokugawa takes on an omniscient voice, words begin to appear on the screen around the figure of Dr. Caligari. Tokugawa states, "He is hearing these words like an auditory hallucination," calling attention to his own role as *benshi*.[82] *Benshi* Tokugawa himself can be seen as a representative of this auditory hallucination, acknowledging the presence of an extra-textual voice. As the *benshi* voice becomes the voice inside of the head of Caligari that possesses him to construct his murderous plot, Tokugawa augments the film's central themes of insanity, possession, and obsession. Through the inclusion of *benshi,* the German film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* takes on new meaning by drawing viewers' attention to the fictional world is being created in this film and corresponding performance while enhancing existing themes through the inherently Japanese tradition of commingled media.

Japanese "commingled" media oppose Western modes of storytelling. The film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was not originally conceived with a narrator; therefore, the *benshi*'s involvement transforms the storytelling into a multi-vocal and transnational experience. The process of tripartite signification and the amalgamation of heterogenous modes of representation creates new patterns of signification and modes of storytelling distinct from the Western standard.

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[82] Ibid.

**FIGURE 3 Robert Wiene (director). Still from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. Germany. Gelatin silver print, 1919. Private Collection.** Source: Kino Films International.

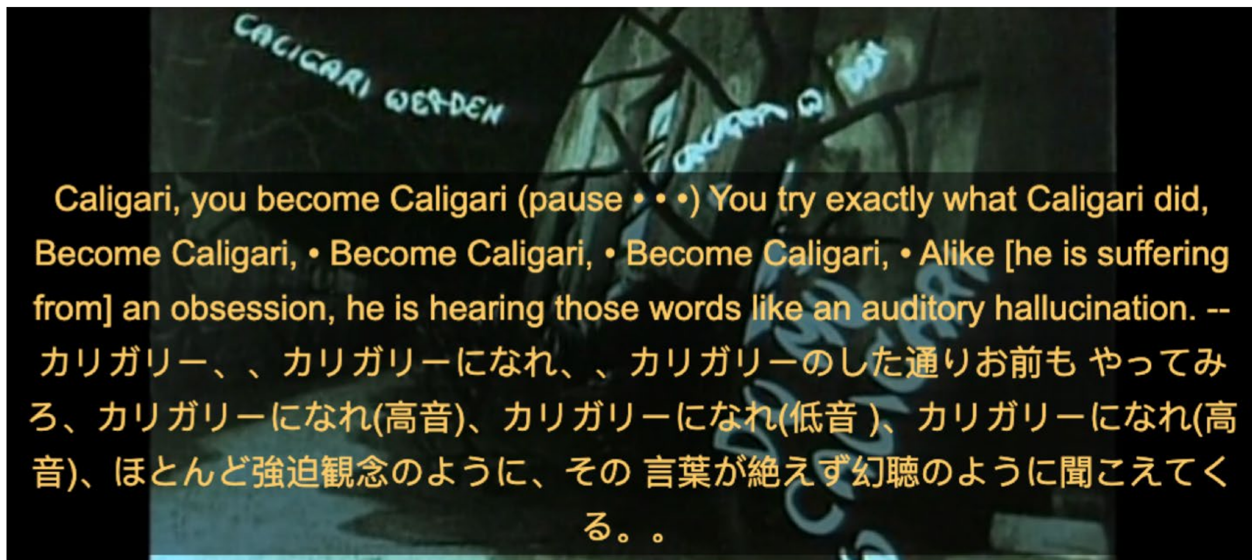


**FIGURE 4 Benshi (Japanese narration): Tokugawa Musei (1968) Transcription by Dr Kyoko Omori. Video. *The Director Agonizes Over Becoming "Doctor Caligari"*. Hamilton College 2011. Video courtesy of Matsuda Productions, Audio Courtesy of Kino International.** Source: Digital Humanities Initiative, Hamilton College, New York.

However, Japanese cinematic narratorial structures—made possible through the multi-vocality of *benshi* performance—were not celebrated as being distinctly Japanese; instead, they were criticized by film critics for hindering the development of an autonomous cinematic language of communication in Japanese film[83] Japanese filmmakers were accused of over-reliance on *benshi* narration as they did not solely use the film medium itself to convey plot[84] Additionally, for logistical reasons, *benshi* could not travel internationally, prohibiting international recognition and trade of Japanese cinema in global markets. The reliance on *benshi* to create works of cinema in line with the commingled arts traditions in Japan did not align with the commodification of cinema and global trade.

Proponents of the Japanese pure film movement likewise espoused criticism of *benshi*. The term "pure film movement" was retroactively coined to define the trend in Japanese film criticism and filmmaking between 1910 and 1920.[85] Supporters of this movement strove to create a Japanese cinematic tradition that captured the essence of unique naturalistic cinema, upholding hierarchies of taste that viewed western film as the standard for filmmaking. The critiques put forward by proponents of pure film aligned with the western-style modernization policies put forward by the Meiji government during this period and contemporaneous western movements of pure cinema and modernism. One of the central goals of the pure film movement was to advance the cinematic language of Japanese film and obtain international recognition coinciding with

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[83] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 70.

[84] Ibid., 71.

[85] Ibid., 95.

Japanese nationalism and efforts towards global power. They aimed to distance Japanese film from its roots in theatre and move towards the naturalistic style of film beginning in the West. This movement implied criticism of *benshi* and called for filmmakers to construct films that could be understood without *benshi* narration.[86]

Film criticism in the late nineteenth-century implied universal understandings of art; however, those understandings were tied to normative western perspectives of identity, authorship, originality, and modes of representation. The pure film movement was opposed to the *benshi*, considering them to be representative of the underdeveloped nature of Japanese cinema during the early 20th century. For example, pure film thinkers argued that low frame rate in Japanese films would be construed as advertising their industrial poverty and that unclear narratives indicated technological inability and ignorance.[87] Eventually, with the diffusion of *benshi* criticism and the invention of sound film, *benshi* were subordinated and then replaced.[88] Pure film movement adherents still sought inspiration from Japanese theatre, but followed the codes of western cinema.[89] They called for called for Japanese filmmakers to create work that resembled films of the west, thereby demanding the elimination of the *benshi*.

Reliance on the *benshi* stood as a barrier to international trade and therefore recognition.[90] No longer able to rely on *benshi* oration, Japanese cinema was forced to become a closed text void

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Laura Lee, "The Pure Film Movement and Modern Japanese Film Style," in *A Companion to Japanese Cinema*, ed. David Desser (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022.), 50, doi:10.1002/9781118955352

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid., 106.

[90] Gerow, "The Benshi's New Face," 95.

of extra-textual elements that had previously distinguished it from other world cinemas. While internalizing western cinematic methods of representation inspired innovation in Japanese cinema, it nevertheless opposed the history of commingled Japanese performance, including *benshi*. Along with the elimination of *benshi,* film actors who had been criticized for being emotionless altered their appearances and acting to mirror their western competition.[91] The Japanese body and body of film were altered as similarity to American competition and exports became essential for a film to be considered complete.[92] Japanese filmmakers desired to show their films internationally. As such, they were required to create films that recreated distinct Japanese culture without elements that connected their work to Japanese artistic heritage, such as *benshi*.[93]

*Benshi* in early Japanese cinema, evidenced in Tokugawa Musei's performance from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* demonstrated a cinematic tradition that is inherently Japanese. By commingling heterogenous artistic elements, *benshi* create a new text altogether. However, while this distinctly Japanese art form proves the innovative power of early Japanese filmmakers to transform western art to suit cultural needs, their productions were not critically or economically well-regarded. The Japanese representation system did not abide by the rules of the international market or the precepts for film demonstrated by American exports. Likewise, because Japanese filmmaking was representative of Japanese artistic heritage, it was not valued by the ever-modernizing Japan. While processes of globalization had the power to bring American technology to Japan, and Japanese dignitaries to the west, the Japanese cinematic art created via this

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[91] Ibid., 115.

[92] Ibid., 114.

[93] Ibid.

international innovation required translation back into the cinematic language of the dominant economic force to obtain national and international acclaim. This led to Japanese critics and filmmakers viewing *benshi*-narrated cinema as inferior. Despite efforts to eradicate *benshi*, archival work such as Dr. Kyoko Omori's project "*Benshi*: Silent Film Narrators in Japan" enables scholars to develop deeper understandings of *benshi* performance. Through the study of early Japanese silent film and *benshi* performance contemporary scholars can expand understandings of the effects of westernization on world cinema by creating space for art that deviates from the western standard. Further, art historians can begin to create critical space and resources for multi-vocal cinema broadening understandings of multi-media meaning making while honoring traditions of "commingled" media in art.

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