

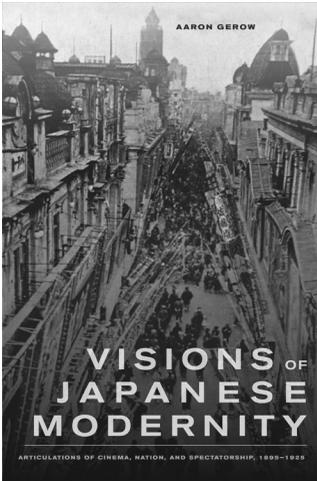
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## Book Review: Aaron Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation and Spectatorship, 1895-1925*

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Aaron Gerow's influence and importance in the field of Japanese film and media studies cannot be overstated. Recently, he has taken up the task of incorporating non-Western voices into the canon of film theory. In seeking a place for Japanese film theorists that does not fall under the heading of "alternative," a term he feels reinforces postcolonial hegemonic structures, Gerow is working against existing binaries that privilege Western film theory and its application to non-Western cinemas. Much of his work draws on years of careful archival research of the prewar period of Japanese film history. His latest book, *Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation and Spectatorship, 1895-1925*, represents the culmination of much of Gerow's previous oeuvre on early Japanese cinema. It combines arguments regarding the nature of power and control in the social construction of cinema with his current effort to give voice to Japanese film theory.

*Visions* narrates the history of the Pure Film Movement, a loosely organized critical movement in Japan that called for the film industry to

reform in the late teens to early twenties. These reforms would theoretically have made Japanese filmmaking more structurally modern and better equipped to compete in the international market. Showing more than just a summary of the ideas of the movement, Gerow demonstrates how the influence of cinema in society changed from one that was unpredictable and a source of anxiety for the state to one that reinforced state control, based on the tenets of Pure Film reforms. Well-organized and articulate, *Visions* is a worthy contribution even for those not invested in studying Japan, as Gerow's methodology, as his title implies, provides a fresh angle for considering broad ideas, such as nation and spectatorship. Specifically, this work would be useful for a wider audience interested in silent film, power as it is manifest in popular culture, and the relationship of the spectator to the space of the theater and to the state.

In the introduction, Gerow is careful to clarify that this book is primarily a history of discourses rather than a history that directly analyzes films. He looks at how film is constructed through writing,

specifically the direct and indirect dialogues that occur between filmmakers, exhibitors, critics, and scholars as well as state authorities, such as censors and policemen. This is in part done out of necessity, as many of the films from the period he describes have been lost, and it is difficult to reconstruct the marginal voices—for example, those of lower class spectators or children—from the writing that does remain.<sup>1</sup> He argues that this methodological choice allows him to step outside of the film object into the realm of practice and draw attention to a period in Japanese film history that has been ignored because of the absence of films. Discourse becomes a means to access an absent archive. Additionally, he is “interested ... in not just the things discourse describes, but also the historically grounded set of rules and practices that, never reducible to things or words, do not simply name an already present reality, but work to mold and create objects of understanding and knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Objects exist at a nexus of negotiation, and it is the negotiations themselves Gerow seeks to reveal.

One of the most relevant aspects of Gerow’s book is that he chooses not to focus on the East-West binary that dominates much of scholarship on Japanese cinema, instead focusing on internal divisions between institutions and the masses. To be sure, the Pure Film Movement’s rhetoric placed Western films at the top of a cultural hierarchy in order to define what was or was not “cinematic.” Gerow’s point is, however, that the struggle for power vis-à-vis the West was not the only source of national identity crisis. Internal class struggle was also at work, contributing to anxiety related to national identity. By establishing a domestic Other, he is able to discuss a version of modernity that is not necessarily dependent on the West for definition. Building off of Miriam Silverberg’s ideas of code-switching, he thinks of Japanese modernity as multivalent and located in the tension between consumers acting out their own version of modernity as the state dictates an idealized notion of the modern from the top-down.<sup>3</sup>

Absent from Gerow’s discussion of “multiple modernities” is the Japanese Empire.<sup>4</sup> This is due in part to the time period he is discussing, before Japan had made serious inroads into colonizing mainland China. However, the Pure Film Movement’s lack of interest in colonized nations, such as Korea and

Taiwan, and the later use of cinema as an imperial tool to teach Japanese ideology warrant some attention. The multiplicity Gerow describes in this book is located more in class-based modes of consumption and the derivation of meaning from cinematic texts more than in ethnic tension based in Japanese colonialism. This places him outside of another recent body of scholarship that addresses the myth of Japanese homogeneity from the point of view of colonized others (from Taiwan, Korea, and the rest of Asia), rather than colonizing others (such as the West).

The chapters are arranged roughly in chronological order, starting with the introduction of cinema to Japan in 1895 and ending with the nationalization of the censorship system in 1925, with a brief discussion in the conclusion regarding the 1930s and 1940s as a period when the state began to assert greater control over film and spectators. In chapter one, Gerow emphasizes that motion picture discourse predates the arrival of cinematic machines. Before the so-called “Zigomar incident”—a media panic linking juvenile crimes with the exhibition of a French serial based on a handsome burglar—cinema did not exist as a discursive object independent from other *misemono* (sideshow).<sup>5</sup> The incident led to authorities’ recognition of film as a social problem located in both the specificity of motion picture media as well as the unruly, unregulated space of the theater.

Chapters two and three discuss the way in which studying film became a means of controlling the perceived social problem of film. In order to regulate the moviegoing experience, it was necessary to understand it; this is what early film scholars and Pure Film critics set out to do. As a representative case study, Gerow introduces the work of Gonda Yonosuke, one of the first Japanese scholars to take an interest in film.<sup>6</sup> Gonda believed in cinema as an open text, wherein audiences maintained a degree of control over their viewing experience and the freedom to interpret the film in any way. At the same time, he believed an educated viewer was in a better position to understand and interpret films for lay audiences. Gonda’s emphasis on film study and the hierarchical position of the educated subject laid the groundwork for the Pure Film critics, even if they disagreed fundamentally

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on the freedom audiences should have to interpret films, believing the masses could not be trusted to interpret a film on their own. Pure Film theorists believed in a closed filmic text with a “correct” and “incorrect” interpretation based on the author’s intent. This is an idea that would later be adopted by the state, in which “correct” meant being in line with state ideology, and “incorrect” meant engaging in alternative readings. This was an expression of class conflict that emerged from the discursive effort to define a “Taishō modernism [that was] clean, intelligent, and high class.”<sup>7</sup>

The final two chapters further develop the idea of cinema as a universal, closed text. Chapter four tracks a shift in the idea of authorship, looking at the role of the *benshi* in the movie theater as well as industry structures that went from favoring exhibition (film as *misemono*) to production (film as authorial text).<sup>8</sup> *Benshi* acted as mediators between the film and the audience. According to Pure Film advocates, they were one of the elements that made Japanese cinema un-cinematic because they intervened with the meaning of the text and destroyed the necessary sense of diegesis. Gerow complicates this idea of the *benshi* to argue that they, in fact, contributed to the diegetic effect of the film; moreover, he argues persuasively that they came to be part of the state system of surveillance that brought the social problem of cinema introduced with the Zigomar incident under control. The final chapter is a detailed description and analysis of

ensorship as its own form of discourse. Rooted in a new understanding of the spectator, Gerow’s analysis demonstrates how censorship began as a means to control the potentially subversive effects of film on what was imagined to be an unruly, uneducated mass audience. Ultimately, state censorship paved the way for film to become an educational tool that was actively used by the state to educate subjects in their duties in service of the state.

As much as it is a thorough history of the Japanese film industry before 1925, *Visions* is located at the center of so many different dialogues that, as a whole, it is perhaps not the most useful introductory text. In order to address the complex interaction between cinema, the spectator, and the state, Gerow necessarily assumes readers’ familiarity with the basics of film and postcolonial theory, which could be disorienting for beginning scholars or undergraduates who might not yet be familiar with these lexicons. On the other hand, the chapters on Gonda and censorship are innovative and, on their own, would be a strong resource for a variety of topics in film studies, from historiography to questions of national cinema. As a resource for this period of Japanese history, the level of detail and intricate footnotes are also invaluable. The book is a productive blend of applying theory to historical research, proving that there need not be any real division between theoretical approaches to film studies and methodologies grounded in political economy and empirical research.

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### End Notes

1 In the conclusion, Gerow openly admits the disadvantages of discourse and the vagueness of some of his statements but cites them as places from which future scholarship can build rather than real weaknesses in his argument. Aaron Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation and Spectatorship, 1895-1925* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 228.

2 *Ibid.*, 8.

3 “The active and often sophisticated process of moving between pieces chosen from various cultures within and without Japan is ... ‘code-switching.’” Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic, Grotesque, Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 30.

4 Gerow, 104.

5 *Misemano* literally means “object that is shown.” Gerow translates it here as “sideshow” because this allows him to convey the carnivalesque atmosphere of this type of mass entertainment. *Ibid.*, 40-47.

6 Japanese names are written with the family name first and given name second.

7 Gerow differentiates between Taishō modernism (1912-1926) and Meiji modernism (1868-1912), reminding the reader that the former was being constructed as an improvement on the social and economic modernity of the latter. *Ibid.*, 117.

8 Gerow briefly describes “the institution of *benshi*, [the] long-lasting practice of having a person in the silent era narrate films for the audience, one that made speaking about and explaining the cinema a central part of experiencing the medium.” Rather than address this as a uniquely Japanese tradition, he subtly places this tradition into a greater context of silent film accompaniment. *Ibid.*, 3.