Remarks on Benshi Tradition and Neo-Benshi

Konrad Steiner

The benshi was a film-teller, and thrived in Korea and Japan during the silent film era. The professional organization was strong enough to actually forestall the introduction of sound cinema technology into the production stream from studio to theater by several years.

The benshi would narrate silent films by acting both as narrator and by voicing characterizations during the course of a film, switching between roles such as Mel Blank’s Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck. In Japanese puppet theater the manipulators of the puppets are dressed discretely in black, but all the time visible. Similarly the benshi, like a ventriloquist, is visible at all times, but unlike the Wizard of Oz, requires no curtain. Midori Sawato, the modern exponent of the traditional benshi practice, merely sits at a table to the left of the screen with a small lamp and her script. Advocating this all-but-lost-art through her travels and performances, she inspired me to re-imagine benshi for our post-modern times.

Just as the traditional benshi wrote his (they were invariably men) own script from a studio plot summary and a print of the film, the neo-benshi writes her text from the video store’s copy run back and forth through a DVD player or VCR for analysis. The neo-benshi then plays with that “video-text” to inscribe and torque the narrative with latent or novel meanings, live in front of an audience. This inventive and subversive approach contrasts to pre-recorded ‘audio commentary tracks’ which interpret films and give background or fun facts.

The kino-karaoke combination of theatrical presentation with the re-presentation of a known work critically, humorously, and artfully makes the neo-benshi a form for our jaded times. Remixes and mashes of movies are commonplace nowadays, we know the movies too well not to realize their subtexts and histories. There are some re-dubbing precedents in cinema as well, including Woody Allen’s “What’s Up Tiger Lily” and “Can Dialectics Break Bricks?” a film by the Situationist, Rene Vienet. But the benshi format, which uses a classically framed performance format and tweaks it, takes full advantage of the theatrical nature of the performance, as well as a potentially humorous and ironic stance leveraging the original against itself. At the same time it takes a sincere pleasure in the love of the movies.

Neo-benshi is a step beyond film narration, fan fiction and vidding (pop songs cut against footage of favorite actors) because it involves live audience response and even improvisation. It is a way to take back the cinema that is ours to begin with. Films are the modern fairy tales and comfort, the theater, as ever, provides community and company.

Poetry and Motion

Therine Youngblood

San Francisco poets and filmmakers are pushing the boundaries of the cinematic form. Testing the limits of the medium in the Bay Area is hardly a new occurrence. In 1958, multimedia artist Bruce Conner made A Movie, launching a wave of reassemblage filmmaking. During the late ’60s and early ’70s, the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET) built its home at KQED’s old location at Seventh Street, where artists “painted in time,” fusing together electronic and cinematic techniques. And, for the past two and half decades, gallery spaces like New Langton Arts and Artists’ Television Access have hosted numerous genre-bending artists who are investigating the medium in all its varied aspects. In a city built on shifting ground, it seems only natural that artists should shake the foundation of the form. Now, through live performance, poets and visual artists are finding common ground on which to explore the possibilities of cinema.

Konrad Steiner, a member of San Francisco Cinematheque’s curatorial committee, seeks to highlight the theatrical aspects of cinema through live readings. After seeing Japanese benshi Midori Sawato perform with A Diary of Chuji’s Travels (1927) at the Pacific Film Archive in 2002, Steiner became inspired to revive the art of live narration with film. The Japanese term benshi means “film-teller,” and during the silent film era in Japan and Korea, benshis thrived, writing and performing a script along with a film’s screening. These narrators originally grew out of a need for an interpreter to explain cultural differences or the events taking place in foreign films, but they also grew from Kabuki theater, which traditionally includes an on-stage narrator. “I’d like to reclaim the live theater aspect of cinema,” Steiner says. “After I saw a benshi performance, I realized that could be done simply with words. And who better to turn to than poets?” Steiner approached several poets, many coming out of the San Francisco Poets Theater movement, and asked them to participate as neo-benshis by interpreting a scene from an existing film and performing a new script live while the film is projected.

Neo-benshi’s genre mixing quality also attracts performance poet, creative writing professor, and curator Roxanne Hamilton to the form. “I am interested in this tension between the live, the performative, and the preserved,” she says. “With film, people can escape in the dark and consume images. There is no conversation.” By interacting with cinema through performance, she can have a dialogue with the film’s imagery, narrative, and cultural framework. Through performance, she also has direct access to her audience, who immediately receive her words and gestures, adding another layer to the conversation with the film. As for the audience, the performer’s presence brings cinema back to the theater, making the act of watching an event again. While the privacy of one’s computer screen or television set allows for mobility and comfort, the theater, as ever, provides community and company.