

Title:

Shifting the Syllabus: Reframing the Masculine Narrative in Japanese Cinema Classrooms

Abstract:

In Japan, films by women are often marketed to female audiences as a form of gendered like-attracts-like branding (Laird, 2013). Scholars often hold similar expectations: they anticipate signs of a feminist movement, shared politics, or even sense of artistic community between female filmmakers in Japan. This expectation builds on feminist scholarship on the works of female directors in North America and Europe that positioned works by women as texts of “self-expression” that are in “communication with other women” (de Lauretis, 1988). However, the current state of women in mainstream commercial cinema in Japan is more akin to how Robin Wood characterized the repressed feminist politics amongst women directors in the U.S. commercial market 40 years ago: “In Hollywood films...there is no ‘Women’s Movement’; there are only individual women who feel personally constrained” (1990).

Most female Japanese directors publicly resist feminist politics and sidestep identification as “women directors,” claiming outright that gender has no impact on their works or their work conditions. And yet, their films often confront gendered issues and gendered experiences head-on. The contradiction between what these directors say and what they show has made feminist analysis a complicated task that requires a shift in approach to read between the lines and pay attention to women networking “behind the scenes” (Laird, 2019).

While it has been my project in scholarship to cast a spotlight on women’s networks and women’s history in the industry, it has been my project in the classroom to reshape the Japanese canon and Japanese cinema pedagogy (e.g. Laird, 2010). The idea of Japanese cinema, as told in most classrooms, is a film history throughout which men have told the tragic stories of women. When women appear in Japanese cinema classrooms, they are most often as characters on screen: fictional allegories for sociopolitical crises, particularly those related to national identity and times of precarious masculinity. The exclusion of women as laborers and creators in the industry paints an image of film history that is decidedly male in every conceivable role. By way of example, consider the emphasis the field places on *onnagata* of the silent era: male actors who played female parts as per the tradition of *kabuki* theater. While this is certainly an important characteristic of early cinema in Japan, there is almost no attention paid to the transition to female actors and the story of their new roles in a new industry. What is erased in this selective focus is that there have always been women “behind the scenes” that have shaped Japanese cinema: script girls, assistants, screenwriters, copy editors, stylists, editors, actors, directors, and spectators.

In this short presentation, I will discuss how I integrate women, and especially women directors, into the Japanese cinema classroom. I will give examples of three syllabi with intentional shifts in dominant: an intro-level undergraduate survey course on Japanese film history, an upper-level undergraduate course on the Japanese horror genre, and a graduate-level seminar on Japanese Cinema Studies.

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Author bio:

Colleen A. Laird, Ph.D is an Assistant Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her publications include "One Ghost, Two Shells: The Transnational Treasure Text of Kikuchi Rinko" (*Feminist Media Studies*, 2020), "Imaging a Female Filmmaker: The Director Personas of Nishikawa Miwa and Oigami Naoko" (*Frames Cinema Journal*, 2013), "Star Gazing: Sight Lines and Studio Brands in Postwar Japanese Film Posters" (*Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 2011), and "Japanese Cinema and the Classroom" (*Jump Cut*, 2010). She is currently working a monograph on Japanese women film directors.