"The Japanese Version"

Notes prepared by William W. Kelly


This is a video about aspects of present-day Japan that are seldom seen in other films about the society. It is now rather dated, but it remains for me a very thought-provoking documentary about Japan. Alvarez and Kolker are award-winning professional video producers, with little background in Japan or Japanese studies. However, they took seriously their curiosity about the society, and spent a lot of time there before and during filming. They brought to the project considerable cinematographic skills and also experience in documenting various aspects of contemporary American culture and institutions. ["American Tongues," a brilliant portrait of the varieties of English language in the US, is an earlier video of theirs.]

Japanese and foreigners alike persist in imagining Japan as an isolated and introverted island society. To my colleague Dick Samuels, an MIT political scientist, the full mantra is "small-island-trading-nation-precariously-dependent-upon-raw-materials-cut-adrift-in-a-hostile-world!" (cited in Steven Reed, Making Common Sense of Japan, 1993, p. 157). This documentary, however, is further evidence of the complex relations that Japan has had with the outside world over many centuries.

This indeed was the producers' initial interest: what happens to American mass culture when it is imported to Japan? What they discovered is what I hope you will come to appreciate. This is no simple process of imitation. Foreign ideas, institutions, and individuals have been borrowed, incorporated, domesticated, and--in the process--thoroughly transformed. Japan is indeed a fully "modern" society, but what that teaches us is that modernity is a global condition that is always and everywhere distinctively localized."Popular" culture in Japan, as most everywhere in the world today, is highly commodified and thoroughly commercialized. Mass media are new, potent forces in twentieth-century Japanese society, although they profitably and playfully meld real and imagined "traditions" from Japan's past with importation of foreign fads and forces. The documentary shows, for example, that weddings were now highly commercialized in late twentieth-century Japan, and it suggests that a dichotomy of tradition vs. modern has assigned "Shintô" weddings to the former category (as the traditional, Japanese custom) and "Christian" weddings to the latter (as the modern, Western innovation). However, it is important to remember that the "traditional" Shintô wedding was invented only in 1900, on the occasion of the marriage of the then-Crown Prince, later the Emperor Taishô (who was the current Emperor Heisei's grandfather). At the time, the Japanese imperial family wanted to emulate the elaborate rituals of European royalty, although in a Japanese idiom. Because Meiji oligarchs had by then thoroughly Shintô-ized the imperial institution, the marriage ceremony was designed along those lines. Its form quickly spread downward through the population.

Alvarez and Kolker began their project with a seemingly simple question: what happens when American popular culture comes to Japan? "We wondered," they say, "if their passion for modern things mean that they were losing their traditional culture." This led them to an "onion" model of discovery. Their first impressions were of "Japanese" culture everywhere; then they began to recognize "American" elements wherever they turned; and finally, they came to realize just how changed were these "American" phenomenon, in form and function. Mass culture in Japan has been Americanized but then this Americanized mass culture has been re-Japanized.

The body of the documentary is composed as a loose assemblage of nine segments, presented with minimal editorializing:
a guided tour of a love hotel by its architect-developer, Shin Ami, whose earlier experience was in designing kindergartens. "They're the same thing," he claims as he shows us a "Lincoln Center" suite with a pastiche of American clichés-Las Vegas roulette table, Playboy bunny emblems, Muppets, etc.

- weddings and a reception at the Tamahimeden Wedding Palace, just the sort of place where Walter Edwards did his field work (we will read a section of his book later). The couples here are given a choice between "traditional" Shintô ceremony and Christian church vows.

- outdoor parties for springtime cherry blossom viewing, during which interviewees express a wide range of judgments about felt differences with the US.

- a cowboy bar in Shinjuku, where we meet "Doc Suzuki" and other regulars who liken the self-reliance and pride in work of their own professional identities to that of cowboys. We learn from them that the true message of the American cowboy legend is not the independence of the lone gunslinger at high noon but the cooperative effort and perseverance of the cattle drive.

- the uses of English words and phrases, which should remind you of James Stanlaw's notion of "foreign-inspired" words, to conjure up a nostalgia (akogare) for someone else's past, thus the 1950's retro boom.

- lessons for women in Western etiquette at a Tokyo branch of the John Robert Powers Academy charm school, including how to sit down gracefully in a Western-style chair, how to walk in high heels, how to do formal dinner place settings. The appropriation of Western manners apparently sometimes includes eye surgery to complete the make-over.

- a short sample of television commercials that feature Western models, including the European woman who explains her success in terms being "cute." Note the explanation of an ad executive that such foreigners are used because viewers can look at them "objectively": "they're not Miss Yamada from next door," he says.

- "foreign talents" in the media (including the ex-Mormon missionary Kent Gilbert and the New Yorker Dave Spector, who even in 2004 remain popular); and

- Nippon Television's annual "Ultra Quiz," an anxious journey across the United States by the hardy band of contestants selected from 20,000 initial entrants-a journey which ends with an embrace of the Statue of Liberty and which continually skirts the edges of sadism and racism. When I first screened the documentary when it came out in 1991, students in class were appalled by the show's treatment of its contestants and local settings alike. Now that "Survivor" and its offspring have unleashed their own brand of "realistic" sado-masochism on American television, we have less margin for censure. ["Survivor" certainly plays to American stereotypes of the "primitive" as surely as Ultra Quiz paners to some of the worst Japanese images of the US.]

The documentary includes some archival footage from the nineteenth century (Commodore Perry, Emperor Meiji), the early twentieth century (baseball, Western clothes), and the immediate postwar to argue that "shopping around" has a long pedigree in Japanese history. Also interspersed among these segments are short commentaries and responses from Japanese and foreigners about Japanese propensity to borrow and adapt. The critic and playwright Donald Richie opines that the Japanese don't much distinguish items as "foreign," but "think of all of this as Japanese." Richie likens Japan to the cuckoo, a bird which sits in others' nests and hatches their eggs. At another point, he argues that the Japanese are working for endless choice, perhaps a legacy of the want and deprivation older Japanese experienced in the Depression and wartime of their youth. Ian Buruma, on the other hand, claims that the Japanese take only the forms of foreign objects and icons and don't even try to understand their substance. I myself am not persuaded by their explanations, and in class, I want to interpret some of the materials of the documentary in terms of a concept of "indigenization." For an even harsher appraisal of the documentary, please see the comments of Professor Henry D. Smith III, a distinguished historian of Japan at Columbia University.
But as for the documentary itself, it is hard not to be moved to both laughter and indignation, although we are often not sure whether to laugh or shout—and at whom!