A Commentary on "The Japanese Version"

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I first saw this documentary at Columbia University in early 90s, and I was very amused by all the outrageous things depicted, although somehow uneasy about the image of Japan that was projected. Seeing it again now a number of years later (March, 2000), I have even greater doubts about it, and I wonder about the wisdom of showing it to American students freshly arrived in Japan.

It is undeniably fun to watch, a whole stream of some of the most outrageous and often hilarious excesses of Japanese popular culture. It starts with a love hotel that seems specialize in America fantasies, with one room that has the American flag on every surface, another on the Las Vegas gambling motif complete with a roulette table—and something to do with the Muppets. (Revealingly, the Japanese woman who apparently was used as the guide/interpreter for the film interjects in a perceptibly impatient voice that the two are wholly incompatible, whereupon the owner interjects that such imbalances are precisely the appeal. This is the only hint that we ever get that there might be Japanese who find all of this as ridiculous as we do.) He also, smiling and laughing all the while, shows the special furin telephone which provides a list of excuses that one can make about why one is coming home late after a tryst at the love hotel.

Then (inevitably), there is the sequence on Japanese weddings at a grotesquely kitsch wedding palace called Tamahimeiden [in Kyoto], where one couple in traditional dress does a Shinto wedding [which of course is taken simply as a mark of tradition, although we know that the Shinto wedding is a wholly modern invented tradition, a subtlety of the sort that this insistently ahistorical film never gets into] where they end up cutting a gigantic wedding cake—made of rubber, since it is purely for theatrical effect. Then another that chooses the church-style complete with a service that has a minister blessing them with the words of Christ and a choir singing hymns. Asked if they are Christians, they laugh in protest, no, we have no religion! It is just a matter of the *kakko-ii* image that they have seen on TV and in movies. So the viewer is left with an utterly stereotyped and misleading grasp of religion in Japan.

On to the bar in Tokyo designed for Japanese who love country-and-western culture, all dressed up in jeans and cowboy hats, often with beard and mustache, complete with cowboy names like Ben and Jim and Rowdy. They also admit that it all comes straight from TV and movies. One suggested that Americans actually have it all wrong when they stress the rugged individualism of the cowboy: for these Japanese cowboy wannabees, it is rather the element of behaving as a group around the campfire, the teamwork needed for a cattle drive. Another, a dentist in the real world, opines that it is rather the element of dedicated hard work that helps him relate to cowboys. Pretty revealing, actually, although of course these were precisely the kind of opinions the film-makers were fishing for.

Another sequence, and one of the most revealing, is on *gaijin tarento*, featuring Kent Gilbert, Dave Specter, and the other Kent is particularly candid, noting that they are called pandas, exotic things that one stares and giggles at, throwing them marshmallows. Spector admits that he does the most stupid and foolish things on TV—but that for half a million dollars a year, he would be delighted to be an even lower form of life than a panda, maybe a sloth. Doesn't bother him a bit. The interpretation given by the narrator is that this is a way of cutting the foreigner down to size, since these are people that are unknown outside Japan, have somehow become domesticated.

And near the end, we are given a sequence on the popular show Ultra-Quiz, which does its quizzes in front of identifiably American settings, such as from Brooklyn looking across to Manhattan, or in Las Vegas, or at Gettysburg. The contestants of course are dressed up like absolute idiots. One hilarious sequence features the penalty phase (*batsu geemu*) for the losers in Las Vegas, where they are given a quick course in how to deal poker. Then a sinister bouncer type appears and announces that they have a private game ready, and need a dealer. The poor sap is led into a rowdy scene, with one of the players flouting a long cigar and announcing that he doesn't want the cameras on him. But of course they show him anyway, and he proceeds to behave in predictably loud and outrageous ways, telling the dealer how inept he is—and finally pulling a gun on him! In the end, of course, the contestant realizes it is a spoof, and all have a good laugh. Obviously, the contestant had to know it was a spoof to begin with: he really didn't seem all that terrified.
when the gun appeared. So who is laughing at whom?

And so forth. All pretty amusing. But what is the point of it all? The basic message is a very hackneyed one, that the Japanese love to take in foreign things and then make them their own: the Japanese version. Well, ok, although this line is so simplistic and misleading and hackneyed that there's absolutely nothing new or revealing about it. And the way it is done is extremely biased. The whole theme is the Japanese use of America, so the film is by its very conception entirely America-centric. It also focuses on the worst excesses of popular culture, the most kitsch of kitsch in all Japan. As such, it is utterly patronizing, exoticizing, and profoundly misleading. Never are serious underlying issues raised: it stops at the level of purely superficial forms, and the only message is that of akogare for America, and how what they end up with is not really America.

In the end, this sort of film is just as offensive and misleading to me as those that present Japan as a repository of tradition, doing things in ancient and timeless ways—which in fact is precisely the other side of the coin that is suggested at the very start. So we are trapped again in a culture that is somehow either schizophrenic or utterly narrow, isolated, and homogeneous, cultivating great diversity but in the end all the same, an army of image-eating consumerist wannabees. Never is there any sense that one Japanese might be different from the next: all are shown as uniformly afflicted with an fantasy-dominated conception of America. It is a world purely dedicated to consumption and pleasure, and dominated by the mass media. Donald Richie is trotted out for his hackneyed views on how utterly consumerist the Japanese are, remarking that one can buy absolutely anything at a Japanese department store (except maybe parsnips). He very misleadingly suggests that this is their revenge for having to eat one kind of rice for 400 years, which reveals a profoundly mistaken conception of the Tokugawa period: it was precisely then that in fact the Japanese were developing an incredible variety of strains of rice, if one wants to take him literally, and when a rich diversity of local products were flooding markets throughout the country. The patronizing implication is that it is only when Japan was opened that it began to diversify. (He earlier also makes the blithe statement that they borrowed their entire language from China, and nothing could be more deeply misleading.)

So in the end, this is of a piece with the worst sort of Nihonjinron, simply its mirror version in Western Orientalist exoticizing.