

Integrating Japanese Films into Film Production Courses

I teach fiction and documentary film production courses at San Diego State University. Films shown in these classes are selected primarily as examples of relevant aspects of craft and technique. This includes story structure, but film content is not usually the primary criteria.

My primary professional interest is in documentary filmmaking. It's relatively easy to identify documentaries produced by Japanese-Americans. One of the most accessible documentaries set in Japan, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, was made by an American. Even one of the most well-known Japanese documentarians, Kazuhiro Soda, studied at NYU and is based in New York. But perhaps the biggest obstacle to integrating Japanese documentaries into a US documentary class is the challenge of identifying and obtaining access to English language versions of the limited number of well-made Japanese documentaries. As Bingham notes (147) "... the viability of the documentary in Japan, its success as a distinct form, has begun to erode..."

Students in my fiction class make short films. I am particularly interested in encouraging students to develop their talents as visual storytellers. They are required to make a short film without any on-screen dialog. Voice-over narration is permitted. Student are expected to create a sound track, which adds an (unexpected) dimension to the visual story unfolding on screen.

Screening shorts is pedagogically more useful than screening excerpts from features. One very useful example is director Bong Joon-ho's "Shaking Toyko," one part of a three part city portrait *Tokyo!* It's somewhat ironic that Bong is Korean, but his outsider perspective is complementary to our efforts as Americans to understand contemporary Japan. In an interview he notes, "When I look at the Japanese as a foreigner, especially as a Korean, they look so obsessed" (Orange). "I had an image of the people of Tokyo as oddly repressed, defensively lonely... (Weintraub).

Students need context to fully appreciate this film. The protagonist is a Hikikomori.

Hikikomori are generally defined as adults who hole up in their parents' or other relatives' homes for six months or more, often confined to a single room. They do not work and rarely engage with the outside world, in many cases filling their days with television, the internet and video games. They cannot sustain meaningful relationships, often not even with the parents who physically and financially care for them. Some have lived in this state for years, or even decades. According to a government survey released in March, there are nearly 1.2 million people who identify as hikikomori — about one in every 60 Japanese age 15 to 64. But experts say that figure most likely undercounts the full scope of the problem (Rich).

Hikikomori may be suffering from schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, or be on the autism spectrum. Fear, shame and lack of access to mental health services exacerbates the problem.

With this background students are positioned to appreciate the array of devices and techniques, which make this an exemplary short film. It's worth noting that this is a low budget film, that in principle could, for the most part, be produced with resources available to students. Its success comes from applied creativity, without reliance on special effects, elaborate costumes, or extraordinary locations.

Students are asked to critically examine:

- The construction and use of voice-over narration
- Production design
- Composition
- Editing and Sound Design

The film provides sophisticated examples of the techniques of visual storytelling, which students can apply to the development of their own short films. There is of course the additional benefit of learning about life in contemporary Japan.

Bingham, Adam. *Contemporary Japanese Cinema Since Hana-Bi*. Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

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