

“Destination Japan: Japan in Cherry Blossom Time and Japan as Seen From a Rickshaw”

*Wunderkino 2: On the Varieties of Cinematic Experience*  
13th Annual Northeast Historic Film Summer Symposium  
Northeast Historic Film Archive, July 26-28, 2012

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My presentation today is part of a larger project that uses travel and the visual and material culture of tourism to investigate changing perceptions of Japan and its place in the world: how Japan defines itself and is defined by others. This larger project covers the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I refer to earlier and more recent periods to underscore how Japan’s past informs its present, and I consider re-articulations and repurposing of objects and images, and objects and images with enduring cultural currency. An important part of this project is an online archive of material culture that I’ll introduce briefly today, and I hope that this will eventually include moving images like the ones that I focus on in this presentation. I believe these sources communicate unique information and knowledge about Japan not accessible through more conventional primary sources. Because most if not all of the material I seek to contextualize has not been a priority for collecting institutions, I’d like to illustrate its scholarly potential by making it accessible and knowable to a broader audience, a potential first step toward ensuring its preservation.

Today I’ll focus on four 16mm films made between 1926 and 1938, an unprecedented period of rapid development of foreign tourism in Japan as a result of government and industry efforts to bring foreign currency into the country and raise its diplomatic profile as a modern nation. But in order to establish a

meaningful context for my interest in these films, I'll start with a brief background and summary of my larger project, the recuperation and historicizing of common-use, ephemeral objects and images from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a special focus on these first three decades of rapidly developing foreign tourism.

This project began about ten years ago. I had just finished a book about lost films, and I was starving for a better chance to experience photographic views of Japan's early 20<sup>th</sup> century landscape. Since feature films contemporary to the period are a quickly exhausted option, I instead turned to postcards, and this eventually led me to Tourism as a powerful generator of ephemeral images and objects pertaining to Japan during this time; again, this was largely thanks to Japan's political and economic initiatives to make a place for itself among other world powers.

To give you a little background on my approach, I began this project with an understanding of the cultural products of tourism as having meaning beyond their immediate practice and use that can help us understand how culture and cultural processes work. In contrast to the all-too-familiar, disparaging view of tourist and tourism as passive, shallow consumers and consumption, I borrowed John Urry's perspective in valuing these terms because they are flexible, inclusive and constructive in linking cultural flow and 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural identity. The tourist perspective is personal, opening up possibilities for a multiplicity of narrative perspectives; a more personalized gaze accommodates questions about cultural and social value beyond "authentic" and "inauthentic." Next, because of the innate link between travel and education I expanded my definition of tourism as temporarily limited travel, both actual (physically experiential) and virtual (educational,

informational). In this respect I was influenced by the natural link between travelers who physically move through space and armchair travelers, as well as Carol William's view of travel as a metaphor for what she calls "the human psychological passage." The third important starting point for my research was Thomas Schlereth's definition of material culture as "the only class of historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present." Or, more simply, any artifact is an historic event as well as a basic unit of communication.

So at this point let me briefly introduce some of the objects that comprise my working collection of contextual material. (The collection includes postcards, photographs, stereoviews, glass slides, tourist brochures, guidebooks, promotional trade publications, classroom film strips, teaching guides, etc). And here I should explain that because I recognize that this collection represents a snapshot rather than a complete canon, the online archive that I'm building for this material, which is hosted by the University of Rochester library, will be open to contributions by and participation from others.

[slides]

I've actually been collecting material up to the 1960s, which is when outbound tourism finally catches up to the rate at which foreigners were visiting Japan, but I'm stopping here at 1931 for a reason. Tourist class accommodation on Pacific liners was initiated in 1930, the same year the government established a Board of Tourism. That year brought tourists to Japan in record-breaking numbers, and this trend continued well into the decade.

## PART II

This brings me to the four silent 16mm nonfiction films made between 1926 and 1938 that are my focus today: two Eastman Kodak films available for rental or purchase, the Kodascope *Rambling Around Old Japan* (c. 1926-1927) and the Eastman Classroom Film titled simply *Japan Part I* (1938); and two amateur travel films, *Japan as Seen from a Rickshaw* (c. 1931-1932), and *Wyeth World Cruise: Japan in Cherry Blossom Time* (c. 1932). These films share significant points in common. They are all nonfiction films about the landscape and people of Japan, filmed in Japan at a moment when foreign tourism to that country was undergoing a quantifiable and qualitative transformation. They are also all early examples of a new direction in moving images made possible by new technology. And finally, all but one of these films is at a critical point in their existence. *Japan in Cherry Blossom Time* underwent preservation in 2001, and I will be concluding today with an eight-minute excerpt, but the other three prints are too shrunken to be projectable. My work with them has been limited to winding through them by hand, documenting them with frame captures photographed through a loupe, which is what I will be showing you today.

As is well known, the Eastman Kodak Company introduced the 16mm Cine-Kodak motion picture set in 1923 and announced the initiation of an amateur film processing service. An amateur filmmaking market already existed, but the Cine-Kodak's fine-grained, safety stock "reversal film" was unprecedented, and the system economized and simplified filmmaking in a way that transformed film consumption. In addition, the fully electric, completely automatic Kodascope

projector generated an increased demand for ready-made films, so within a year of introducing the Ciné-Kodak set, Kodak announced that it was putting together a library of films made by the reduction of standard gauge 35mm films to 16mm and plans “in the next year to have several hundred subjects available, including scenic pictures, stories for children, and pictures of all kinds of a type suitable for use in the home.”

*Rambling Around Old Japan* is one of a handful of 400’ 16 minute films about Japan listed as available for rental in the Kodascope library. After paying a membership fee of \$25, refundable upon discontinuing service, customers could rent these films for a small fee (*Rambling* was available for \$1.25). There were 8 categories of films to choose from, and the Japan-related titles—including *They went to See in a Rickshaw* and *Mr. Outing Instructs*—were listed as Class 1: Travel, Sports, Manners and Customs. The Kodascope library started out with branches in 6 major US cities and one each in Canada, Britain, and Australia, and by 1930 there were 15 US branch offices, 4 Canadian, and 22 Overseas offices, including Shanghai, which is listed as early as the second edition of the catalog, issued in 1927.

Here is the description of *Rambling Through Old Japan* as it is listed in the Kodascope catalogs, beginning with the second edition:

“In Japan we do not need a guide to find interesting things to see. Turn where we may, they confront us. Wandering down to the wharf we watch the people with confetti and paper streamers bidding goodbye to the departing passengers. Our attention is then taken by the numerous freight boats which fill the harbor—one man boats many of them—whose crews and their families live on board. A train pulls in, its woman stoker hard at work. Human labor must be cheap. Here is a gang of women operating a pile-driver, and furnishing all the native power to raise the heavy weight. The men also work hard, and we see them hauling wagons and carts over the poor roads. Babies are everywhere, generally strapped on the backs of their

mothers. They look strong and well and we are shocked to learn that 350 out of every 1,000 die before the age of five.”

The film has twenty four explanatory intertitles for which there are five different and elaborate templates illustrated with drawings of blossoms, carp, paper lanterns, bamboo, pine and willow trees, etc., and a scene with a bridge, a small house, and a pagoda in the background. The intertitles are informative if a bit glib, as in this example of a sequence—about making rice-cakes—that isn’t mentioned in the catalog description. Kodascopes were meant to be entertaining as well as informative, but the humor—for example, describing a bamboo oil derrick that resembles “a bunch of toothpicks,” a train-ride as jumpy as a milkshake, and “bad roads and worse horses,” paints a quaint picture of Japan. This emphasis on backwards technology is tempered somewhat by a final sequence about police training that explains that the “police duties of Japan compare with those of other countries,” but the film ends with shots of the “city street sprinkling department,” the “one-man power cars” that “settle the dust” of busy city streets. The emphasis — what was assumed to be of interest to a general audience—is not on modernity and middle-class culture but industrious working class men and women. This accent on hard labor poses an odd contrast to the fanciful illustrations that embroider the narrative intertitles, a juxtaposition that creates further distance between viewers and this far away land and its people.

The 1938 Eastman Classroom Film based on footage shot by the freelance cameraman Julien Bryan in 1935 offers a striking contrast to *Rambling Around Old Japan*. Produced by Eastman Teaching Films, Inc., a subsidiary of Kodak, Eastman Classroom Films were made specifically for classroom use as a supplement to

teachers' instruction. *Japan, Part 1* uses minimal intertitles and abstains from storytelling, with sparsely worded intertitles without illustration of any kind. It is structured like a piece of travel writing that begins with an approach to the island. Intertitles open the film explaining that the islands of Japan are peaks of a submerged mountain range, and then moves on—just like its Kodascope predecessor—to a busy harbor. This film focuses exclusively on contemporary city life. The first sequence is shot in a department store, and is prefaced with the title, “the cities and shops appear much like our own.” After introducing a busy newspaper office and various scenes of elementary school instruction, children’s healthcare, and sports, the film ends with a detailed section on home life that brings the camera into a contemporary, comfortable middle-class domestic setting: a family arrives home and has tea, the parents ready themselves for dinner, dinner is served, children are put to bed. The film ends on an intimate note with a close up of the mistress of the house laying her head down on her pillow.

The more personal lens of the amateur travel film genre helps bridge the transition between *Rambling Around Old Japan's* emphasis on quaint unfamiliarity and the Eastman Classroom Film made a decade later. Lacking the commercial polish of *Japan Part I*, they offer glimpses of their makers, individuals behind the camera recording life in Japan first hand. The first film, *Japan as Seen from a Rickshaw*, was deposited at George Eastman House in 1989 along with 6 other films with a similar production title that reads “Jeanne Films.” No other information is available about the acquisition, except that this title card is not the name of the filmmaker, but rather indicates that the films all belong to one collection of films

ostensibly made by the same person. Two things suggest that this individual was more than a casual filmmaker. First, the film bears the camera signature of a Bell & Howell Filmo 70, the spring-motor driven, high-end 16mm camera that made hand-held camerawork possible without an additional attachment. Second, it begins with the logo of the Amateur Cinema League, indicating that the filmmaker was a member. This connection to the Amateur Cinema League adds resonance to the filmmaker's obvious interest in the box office activity and theater facades in Asakusa, Tokyo's entertainment district, as well as the unexpected highlight of the film, an encounter with a "Cinema Party," a film crew on location in Arashiyama in Kyoto. I've included here a few frame captures from this sequence but they don't do justice to the sense of lively interaction between both parties in front of and behind the camera. ACL membership might also account for the care taken in editing the film into a coherent narrative structure, and the pictorial beauty of many of the shots. The 700' film begins with a map of Japan as a pointer held by someone off camera points to the destinations on the filmmaker's route. There are shots in the film of every location on the itinerary except for Osaka and Yokohama, and the filmmaker made at least two stops, at Ise and Kamakura, that are not included on this map.

*Japan as Seen from a Rickshaw* is divided into two parts under a general heading, "Scenes and People." Part 1 is shot in Kansai (western Japan) and Part 2 in Kanto (eastern Japan). Like the Eastman Classroom Film shot by Julien Bryan a few years later, the film is structured like a journey, beginning with the filmmaker's arrival, a segment preceded by the title "Approaching the Island." The first shots once the



filmmaker arrives in Japan, titled “A Rainy Day in Kobe,” are taken from a high angle, and were quite possibly shot from a hotel window. The rest of the film is shot outdoors on location at well-known scenic sites or on the street, with the exception of a couple of indoor sequences. There are no rickshaws in sight, but the film does include shots of the countryside taken from a train window. The film’s intertitles offer a straightforward narrative commentary on the filmmaker’s journey, simply naming a location—Water Torii at Miyajima, Theatre Street, Kobe—but occasionally reflecting knowledge gained along the way, as in “The Water Torii is a Gateway to all Shinto Temples,” or “The Komuso, A Political Outcast.” According to the titles, the itinerary is fairly predictable, bringing to mind subjects already popularized through stereoviews and postcards: for example, “Picking Tea,” “The Silkworms have been Busy,” “Hotel Fujiya and Grounds,” “The Sacred Bridge Nikko.” Nothing is predictable about the images, however, in terms of either content or style. In addition to the numerous scenes of busy streets, the camera records in turn scenic long shots, picturesque silhouette compositions, and surprisingly intimate shots of passersby, including individuals who often catch the camera’s gaze: two companions side by side, small clusters of people, families, and children—lots and lots of children, including a bevy of boy scouts standing at attention.

According to its edge code, *Japan as Seen from a Rickshaw* was shot on 1931 reversal film stock, although the beginning and end titles and ACL logo date from one to two years later. It is possible that the final editing of the film didn’t take place until well after the filmmaker’s trip was completed. Rooftop shots of koi-nobori (carp banners) on display suggest the film was shot in the month of May (carp

banners are flown for Boys day, held in May). This familiar Paramount logo that appears to be on the façade of Asakusa's Denkikan is another clue that might help date the film. The Denki-kan was one of the movie theaters run by Shochiku that would have been affected by a merger between Shochiku and Paramount in early May, 1931, so the film was possibly shot at that time.

People are also at the center of *Wyeth's World Cruise: Across Japan in Cherry Blossom Time*. This footage has the advantage of having undergone preservation work, but the original material was already badly decomposed by the time it was salvaged. The preservation officer in charge of the project confirms that although it is possible a minimal amount of footage was too damaged to save, all of what survives remains in its original order. The material is divided between three separate reels. One reel has a title card, another card outlining Mr. Wyeth's itinerary in Japan, and intertitles naming or commenting on individual locations or subject matter, but it is impossible to get a sense of a complete film with an intentional beginning and end on any of the individual reels. The material was deposited at George Eastman House by the nephew of the filmmaker in 1998, along with footage of other Asian locations labeled in a manner that suggests it was taken during the same round the world cruise as Mr. Wyeth's trip to Japan. Some of these other reels are dated 1932, which is the approximate date I give this film.

Like *Japan as Seen from a Rickshaw*, *Across Japan in Cherry Blossom Time* tells us something about Mr. Wyeth as well as his travels. Again, the focus is on passersby, this time including what appear to be members of Mr. Wyeth's own tour group. Whereas the author of *Japan as Seen from a Rickshaw* favored shots of feet, reflecting

curiosity about various styles of footwear, as you'll see for yourselves Mr. Wyeth appears to have been fascinated by the ways in which people carried things. Many of the locations are the same in both films, but there is a conspicuous difference in Mr. Wyeth's itinerary. Examples of "Specimen Tours" for seeing Japan in one month, three weeks, or nine days that were meant to assist first time visitors in planning their itineraries can be found as early as the third issue (Oct. 1913) of *Tourist*, published by The Japan Travel Bureau, and these itineraries appear to have changed little over the years until at least 1940, when a typical route is described as taking tourists to "the continent of Asia" after the usual stops in Tokyo, Kobe, Miyajima, Beppu, etc. Korea is not listed on the typed title card that gives us Mr. Wyeth's itinerary, but it is fortunately the least damaged reel that concludes with views of Seoul under Japanese rule. Thus this reel ends by bringing imperial Japan to life in a way that only moving images can capture.

Re-experiencing objects and images, revisiting their past lives and retracing their paths of exchange enables an active engagement with the past, imparting a more immediate sense of the people who made—and used—these artifacts. Amateur and other nonfiction ephemeral films such as those I have introduced today are records of Japan at a specific historical moment, but such material was never meant to be archived, and is only now in the process of being called "archival." What amateur travel films in particular can offer, are traces of a more personal history, a subjective understanding of everyday life in the world in which they were made. Acknowledging the value of these images that can bring the past more vividly

to life is the first step in rethinking the frameworks through which they become meaningful.

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