Every time one sees a film, although it seems as if that experience is autonomous (a private relation between the spectator and images projected on the screen), the experience exceeds itself. It is about the social as much as the individual; about the public just as much as the private. It is ideological. In fact, just as Sohn-Rethel argued that the very exchange act crowds out the possibility of thinking the various relations of money within the social totality, the very act of viewing the film crowds out the possibility of tracking how the grammar affects everyday perception and behaviour.¹

The rekishi-eiga [history film] must dedicate itself to the preservation of the Japanese past by building it into a new art form. The rekishi-eiga will then serve the function of training the people in that Culture of Feeling which is our special heritage.²

Introduction

This reading of a tea film proceeds in two steps: one that identifies the various genres configured by Teshigahara’s film, and the second stage reminds the reader that these genres reinforce this modernist film’s presentation of one patriarch as the authentic source of tea values and practices. More than lifting the veil of neutrality from

181
the authority of tea pedagogy, the tendency of communities to assert their status as inevitable and unchanging facts of social life is examined. Films dealing with representative icons who embody key national traits provide viewers with the opportunity to consider their relationship to ‘tradition’.

*The film Rikyu as a considered historical intervention*

Teshigahara presents certain incidents from the life of Sen no Rikyu, 1522–91, as being implicated in nationalist discourses of tradition and other processes that reduce Japanese culture to rules and products. Before Rikyu, traditions of codified tea practice already existed and tea was clearly associated with political and military power. Written historical accounts qualify the celebration of Rikyu’s aesthetic genius in tea anecdotes. Teshigahara’s treatment of the oral and written registers of history interacts with issues of representation: the film itself acts as an authoritative source of tea knowledge; and the film represents tea as a ‘cultural sacrament’ located at the nexus of military, commercial and aesthetic authority. This discussion is framed in terms of how the values communicated by the film support the construction of a certain range of viewing identities for its audiences.

*Written history: qualifying the legendary status of Sen no Rikyu*

Two representations of the life of Sen no Rikyu present different tales. The scholarly historical record demonstrates that tea was situated in discourses of economic, military and aesthetic authority. More anecdotal accounts circulate around sites of official tea pedagogy which emphasize the aesthetic aspects of Rikyu’s life while neglecting to mention his commercial activities and military responsibilities.

The work of Kuwata demonstrates that Rikyu’s duties as ‘The Tea Master of Japan’, *tenka gosado*, included taking custody of Osaka Castle as *Rusu* while Hideyoshi was absent in August 1585 and being informed of secret military and political matters. Bodart uses the scholarship of Kuwata Tadachika as the primary source for her investigation of the tea-room politics established during Oda Nobunaga’s regime and continued under Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s direction. *Teihon Sen Rikyu no Shokan* (1971) surveys the contents of more than two hun-