
One Print in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Film Industry and Culture in 1910s Japan¹

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The September 1917 *Katsudô no sekai* (“Movie World”), containing probably one of the first attempts at a broad factual overview of the Japanese film industry, is a valuable resource to those studying the early Japanese film industry. For instance, in the corner of one page, the journal summarizes the average budget of a four-reel, four-thousand foot *shinpa* or *kyûha* film (“shinpa,” literally “new school,” were the films set in the contemporary era and often based on the “contemporary” stage genre of the same name, while “kyûha” were “old school” period dramas).² In itemizing the expenditures of a typical movie that would take four days and 2270 yen to make (in the conversion rate of those days, about US\$4500), *Katsudô no sekai* lists some numbers that must strike some as curious:

Negative film:	¥360
Positive film:	¥360
Location costs:	¥200
Costume/Props:	¥350
Script:	¥100
Filming rights:	¥150
General costs:	¥650
Miscellaneous:	¥100

According to the magazine, “filming rights” (*satsuei shôninryô*) was the gratuity paid to the “author” when filming one of his or her works; “general costs” included studio salaries and other costs and were calculated by considering the proportion of four days of work out of the studio’s monthly costs. But it is the figures for the cost of film stock that stand out, and not simply because the price for the two accounted for 32% of the total budget: note that the amount for negative and positive stock is the same. While *Katsudô no sekai*’s numbers must be taken with a grain of salt (they, for instance, probably did not take into account the slight difference in cost between positive and negative film at the time³), they seem to reflect a film industry that not only rarely re-shot a scene, but considered making only one positive print from a negative the

norm. This assumption about prints is backed up by other sources:⁴ up until the early 1920s, Japanese studios rarely made more than one or two prints of a film.⁵ If a film had more prints than that, like the five of *Ikeru shikabane* (“The Living Corpse,” 1918)⁶, it was treated as a sign of success, not regular practice, one worth noting in movie journalism.

This fact can strike almost anyone with a basic knowledge of early film industry practice outside of Japan as odd. The first movie producers elsewhere made their money less by renting than by selling prints, and thus the mass production of prints was essential to business. Even after film exchanges helped make rentals more central to industry commerce, multiple prints were a matter of course for an increasingly international business with prints traveling all over the country and the world. Theorists like Walter Benjamin in Germany and Gonda Yasunosuke in Japan focused on the technological potentials of the moving pictures to fundamentally change conceptions of art (e.g., “aura” and “originality”). Why then did the Japanese film industry go against what seemed to be not only common business practice, but the capacity of the technology?

One print in the age of mechanical reproduction could potentially be an example of those “idiosyncrasies” that have served as fodder for studies of Japanese cinema both inside and outside Japan. The most famous “idiosyncrasy” is the *benshi*, that apparent anachronism whose existence well into the 1930s has, in the work of Noël Burch, Joseph Anderson, and others, been a marker of difference that guides explorations of the cultural contrasts between Japan and the West. While the ways scholars have used these idiosyncrasies vary, the tendency has been, for instance with Burch and Donald Richie, to have them represent the cultural uniqueness of Japan and its cinema rooted in cultural tradition. That trend, however, often obscures specific historic industrial factors as well as the precise conflicts over forming the modern nation—

and thus “a culture.” In this paper, I would like to use the idiosyncrasy of one print in the age of mechanical reproduction to elaborate historical appropriations of mechanical reproduction in a specific context and thus explore the relations of industry and culture in a modernizing Japan. In doing so, I will investigate the problem of one print less as a form of cultural resistance against modernity than as an articulation of cinema as event through an alternative, hybrid form of modernity that problematized the contemporary formation of the nation. This case can thus provide a fascinating example to those studying early cinema of not only the particular historical problems of structuring the nation and the modern in a non-Western context subject to the pressures of universalization and globalism, but also of the varied, local articulations between industry and culture that shape cinematic experience. I will structure my discussion by considering how the three fields of economy, power, and culture offer various explanations for this seemingly aberrant practice.

Economy

One of the economic impetuses behind the development of technological means of reproduction was the capitalist pursuit of cost reduction, labor savings, and rational efficiency, conditions that in the motion picture world led not only to the mass production of prints, but to the creation of styles and forms of story-telling conducive to Fordist production. The Japanese film industry’s practice of one print in the 1910s seems to go against such modes of economic rationalism, a suspicion that is initially justified by a look at the numbers.

If we accept *Katsudô no seikai*’s figures as reasonably accurate for the time,⁷ it is clear that film costs accounted for a major portion of the budget in the late 1910s. It would only take striking six more prints for a film’s budget to double. This was largely due to the fact that the price of film stock, which was a wholly imported product (and would remain so until Fuji began domestically producing 35mm film in the mid-1930s), rose dramatically after the start of World War I. It was also a reflection of the fact that, with an industry limited in production facilities (Tenkatsu, for instance, still did its filming on a rickety open-air stage) and without an established star system (with most being third-rate travelling players, actor salaries were relatively low), other elements in the budget were not costly. But while the rise of the price of film may help explain why prints were not mass produced,⁸ it does not account for the practice of only one print: that existed from before the war.

Scarcity of film, which was occasionally lamented

in the trade journals, could have also served to check the large production of prints, but as a cause it does not quite square with the contemporary volume of production. From the mid-1910s, most Japanese theaters changed their bills once a week or once every ten days, and showed programs averaging sixteen reels (about four hours long), composed of one foreign film, one *shinpa* or *kyûha* and several comedy or actuality shorts.⁹ Although foreign movies were in the majority, Japanese studios still had to produce a considerable number of titles to keep up with the pace. In 1918, Nikkatsu’s Mukôjima studio (specializing in *shinpa* films) was making four to five pictures a month and Nikkatsu’s Daishôgun studio in Kyôto (for *kyûha*) about seven to eight, which for just one company amounts to about eleven to thirteen titles a month—most about 4000 feet in length.¹⁰ Amidst this flood of products, Nikkatsu and Tenkatsu took a variety of measures to save costs, ranging from rereleasing old films either as is or under new titles, or “remaking” films by using old footage and just adding a few newly shot scenes. One must wonder why it wouldn’t have been more cost efficient to organize distribution such that a few more prints at 360 yen a piece could substitute for producing an entirely new 2270 yen film.¹¹

Financial instability also seems not to have been a factor. Even though Nikkatsu would continue to be plagued by the debts it incurred in its inception, when four companies were merged in 1912 to form a “trust,” after the initial shock of the increase in film costs had passed, and the wartime economy began to boom, the companies after 1915 were reporting phenomenal profits: Nikkatsu in the first half of 1918 reported a gross profit of 185,155.03 yen on inlays of 1,250,243.45 (14.8%),¹² and Tenkatsu a gross profit of 227,436.84 yen on an income of 292,431.13 yen (an amazing 77.8%!) for the same term.¹³ One could speculate that the preference of a new film over extra prints of an existing one was the product of a luxury mind-set brought on by excess profits, but given that Nikkatsu gained these profits in part by engaging in such notorious practices as cranking at eight frames per second or selling worn-out films to fairground dealers who would cut them up and peddle them one frame a piece to fans, these studios were not known for their largess.

One economic factor behind the low number of prints may lie in the structure of the exhibition circuit. Both Nikkatsu and Tenkatsu possessed large theater chains, with Nikkatsu having about 247 and Tenkatsu 134 at the end of 1918,¹⁴ but neither owned many of

those theaters. Although each company had different ways of categorizing its relationships with chain theaters, in general cinemas were divided between “*CHOKUEI*” (directly operated), “*tokuyaku*” (special contract), and “*buai*” (percentage) houses. With *chokuei*, which need not have been directly owned, the studio had to pay all the costs, but in exchange could take in all the proceeds. *Tokuyaku* houses were owned by others, who contracted with the company to show only company-distributed films—in essence, this was a block-booking contract. The theater owner paid a set amount each month for a guaranteed supply of films, but the studio had to bear the cost for at least the projectionist and one clerk (to make sure the company wasn’t being cheated), and sometimes the *benshi* and the projector.¹⁵ With *buai* theaters, the theater owner usually bore all the costs (although companies would still send a clerk to check receipts) and simply paid a percentage to the movie company (50-50, 40-60, 60-40 being the usual options). Importantly, *tokuyaku* far outnumbered the other kinds of houses—accounting, for instance, for 146 of Nikkatsu’s 247 chain theaters (what Nikkatsu called “*kyôdô*” and “*chintai*” houses)—but in this period provided the least income: only 136,217.750 yen (10.9%) of Nikkatsu’s total income of 1,250,243.450 yen in the first half of 1918, a figure less than half of the 345,370.115 yen in income Nikkatsu’s 65 *buai* houses generated.¹⁶ Clearly *chokuei* houses, while being the fewest in number, brought in on average the most income for the company, with Nikkatsu’s 36 theaters in 1918 providing 684,777.610 yen (54.8%) in inlays, or 19021.6 yen per theater for a six-month term. Whether *chokuei* houses were the most profitable is another matter, considering the company had to bear all the costs. The fact Japanese studios refrained from maintaining more than a few dozen *chokuei* houses until the late 1930s indicates that only the small number of central urban cinemas were profitable enough to be maintained as *chokuei*. This is possibly due to the reality that Japanese theaters in the silent era, while on average large, also maintained sizable staffs sometimes numbering over seventy. Given these conditions, it is conceivable that the small number of prints was a factor of the fact that, the more prints were made, the more they had to run at theaters that were less profitable.¹⁷ Making a limited number of prints and concentrating them at their better grossing houses before sending them on to second-run theaters made good economic sense.

This, however, does not explain why the companies made only one or two prints. Nikkatsu, after all, had far more *chokuei* houses and chain theaters than that.

The structure of the exhibition circuits thus provides only one element in why the number of prints was small, but it, like the other economic determinants mentioned here, does not sufficiently account for such an absolutely low number. For this, we have to combine the economic factors with a consideration of the power structure in the industry.

Power: Exhibition Over Production

It is interesting to compare the average return between *tokuyaku* and *buai* theaters. Using the Nikkatsu numbers from above, the difference between the two is clear: an average of 933 yen per *tokuyaku* theater versus 5313 per *buai* house. The gap is almost too wide to believe: given that the average *tokuyaku* rental rate was 300 yen a month, one would imagine a figure closer to 1800 for this six-month term. Perhaps theaters themselves deducted the salaries of those sent from the company before paying rentals. Nonetheless it is true that for Nikkatsu, *buai* income exceeded that from *tokuyaku* theaters for the first twelve years of its existence. The reasons are complex, but one has to do with the fact that *buai* houses were generally less powerful theaters in the countryside who could not demand lower rental fees.¹⁸ Conversely, companies could not exact more from *tokuyaku* theaters precisely because they did not have a dominant position at the bargaining table. *Tokuyaku* contracts involved block-booking, but they could be broken easily (for a penalty), and it seems many were: although Nikkatsu was formed in 1912 as a supposed monopoly, upstarts like Tenkatsu and later Kobayashi Shôkai had little problem in acquiring theaters (albeit not always in the best places) because of the relative freedom of choice theater owners had.¹⁹ Allegiance of theater owners to a company was thus weak: it was not uncommon for an owner of two or more theaters, like Ono Keiji who ran the Daiichi Kôfu-kan and Daini Kôfu-kan in Kôfu, Yamanashi, to have each contract with a different company.²⁰

The struggle for dominance between producers and exhibitors is certainly one of the central issues in early Western film history, but it remains a crucial framework for narrating the structural transformations in Japanese industry history even after WWII. In general, one can argue that in the Japanese film industry strong exhibitors dominated weak producers up until the 1950s.²¹ The reasons for this condition are multi-fold. One is the fact, stressed by Naoki Sanjugo in his critiques of the industry in the 1920s,²² that regardless of the amount of capital companies reported, they were actually capital-poor, a condition that made them vulnerable to the demands of the more monied

exhibition interests. Second, there is the reality that, partially due to prolonged police regulation of theater construction (which started from the Edo era—for kabuki theaters—and continued with varying degrees of restriction until the end of WWII), there were far fewer theaters per capita than in other major film producing nations; the houses that did exist thus tended to be sizable enterprises that could use that as leverage against the capital-weak producers.²³ Third, and most importantly, there is the reality that most of Japan's early film producers were exhibitors who began making films simply in order to fill their programming. Although Yoshizawa Shoten was originally a supplier of photographic equipment, Yokota Shōkai, M. Pathe, and Fukuhōdō, while possibly obtaining their capital from elsewhere, were all at first exhibition companies; exhibitors, or those who started out as exhibitors, like Yokota Einosuke, Kobayashi Kisaburō, and Yamakawa Yoshitarō, continued to dominate later companies like Nikkatsu and Tenkatsu. The production studios themselves, more than being companies creating a product to sell on the market, or factories producing commodities for their sales outlets, the theaters, were like subcontractors hired by exhibitors to maintain film supply, a tendency that would color the film industry until well into the 1930s. This relationship was reflected in at least two dimensions: the power of individual theaters and the loose structure of the film companies.

First, in the 1910s, it was not uncommon to see individual theaters, usually the flagship houses of a company, specifically order the production of films. This was not simply a case with theaters running *rensageki*, the “chain-drama” combination of scenes acted out on stage with those presented in film, which by definition could only be made for a theater and its resident acting troupe. For instance, the *tokuyaku* Taishōkan in Asakusa specifically ordered *kyūha* films from Tenkatsu's Nippori studio; on average three films a month were made for that theater.²⁴ *Benshi* in such cinemas were also known to write up or suggest film stories. Seemingly then, relations between producers and exhibitors were such that one 1200-seat theater in the central location of Asakusa like the Taishōkan—a theater not even owned by the company—could dictate over half of what the Nippori studio produced.

This was possible in part because film companies in the 1910s were not centrally organized entities that dominated over the individuals in them. It might strike some as odd that Nikkatsu, which was formed by buying up Yoshizawa, Yokota, M. Pathe, and Fukuhōdō, did not also as a result acquire the Asian

rights to Kinemacolor, Charles Urban and G. Albert Smith's early color film process, even though Fukuhōdō had bought those rights and applied for a Japanese patent well before it agreed to the merger. One can speculate that this was only possible because Fukuhōdō's employees, whether legally or illegally, had power over the rights that the company itself did not.²⁵ Most other companies were like that. On the one hand, this character facilitated the kind of one-man businesses that were prominent in the industry until WWII; on the other, it often meant that companies had little central control over the powerful individuals within it, especially when they had strong ties to exhibitors. For better or for worse, the Japanese film industry was far from being a business run on modern accounting and centralized management principles: money was—and sometimes still is—handled in a “*donburi kanjō*” manner (where precise books are not kept and fooling with the figures is a persistent problem); fraud and cheating was not uncommon; and relationships with organized crime often influenced the status of individuals, theaters, and companies.

A good example is of this kind of de-centralized, if not unorganized company Tenkatsu.²⁶ A year and a half after it was formed in March 1914, the company effectively subcontracted out its operations to Kobayashi and Yamakawa, two power-brokers who either owned or had influence over many central theaters (Kobayashi in Tōkyō, Yamakawa in Ōsaka). The two resigned from Tenkatsu's board but effectively ran the company from behind, being in charge of both production and exhibition. After a year, Kobayashi, always the maverick lone wolf, pulled out of the contract to start Kobayashi Shōkai, but Yamakawa, more conservatively calculating, remained in Tenkatsu even after the contract ended, essentially ruling autonomously over the company's Ōsaka operations. Although Tenkatsu had an Ōsaka branch office, which was located in the office of Kada Shōkai, a company owned by Kada Kinzaburō, a powerful financial backer of Tenkatsu, there was a separate “*chokueibu*” (directly operated theater office) which was located in Yamakawa's home and was largely independent of the branch office. The branch office handled film rentals for *tokuyaku* and *buai* theaters west of Nagoya, but the *chokueibu* was in charge of the *chokuei* houses in the region—most of which were owned or operated by Yamakawa. Importantly, the Ōsaka studio was under the jurisdiction not of the branch office, but of the *chokueibu*. At first, the studio was on the grounds of the country villa of a relative of Yamamatsu Yujirō, a powerful Ōsaka exhibitor close to Yamakawa, before

a new one was completed in January 1917. Even after that, the studio essentially concentrated on producing films for Yamakawa's theaters, especially *rensaveki* for the Rakutenchi.²⁷

Given this example of how exhibitors exerted considerable control over production companies, it is less difficult to understand why only one or two prints of each film were being made. When a single theater or its owner was powerful enough to order a film from a company, or to exert influence over production, the production of other prints that could be shown at other houses at the same time was out of the question. Even figures like Yamakawa or Kobayashi, who had control over several theaters, were not likely to demand more prints for their own theaters, first because both were involved with *rensaveki*, itself a form that required only one print, and second, because the power of their individual theaters, and the hierarchy of exhibition, depended largely on location (Tōkyō's Asakusa being the prime spot) and status as a *fukirikan* (less a "first-run" than a "premiere" theater)—that is, as a theater which was the only one to show certain films first.

Culture

A consideration of the structure of power in the industry does much to help us understand the background of one print in the age of mechanical reproduction, but should be clear the realm of culture—the meanings attached to these practices—has already entered the picture. The power of certain exhibitors, for instance, was based not only on their economic strength or influence on production companies, but also in an audience practice of placing value in seeing unique films first at *fukirikan* in special locations like Asakusa or Sennichimae.²⁸ While it is difficult, given the paucity of primary source materials that still limits research on early Japanese film history, to locate evidence to elaborate on these spectator attitudes, contemporary magazines do offer indications of the importance of the local *fukiri* house. The value of *fukiri* status, for instance, is evident from theater ads that promoted film programs as not yet being shown anywhere else in Japan; the importance of single theaters is apparent from trade journals, such as the early *Kinema rekōdo*, that introduced less the recent films than the new bills showing at particular houses. Magazines would continue to print introductions to famous theaters into the 1920s, emphasizing their atmosphere and unique programming. Sections in *Kinema rekōdo* and other journals, usually supplied by local fans, reported in every issue on conditions in cities away from Tōkyō, often lamenting the time it took films to reach their towns, while also emphasizing,

for better or for worse, local differences in programming, *benshi*, audiences, and theater conditions.

This emphasis on the cinematic experience as local, as a form of event or performance, was more visibly associated with institutions such as the *benshi* or *rensaveki*, but I would argue it was also reinforced by the industrial practice of producing only one print of a film. Films in 1910s Japan retained some of their aura as unique objects, as originals that could be viewed anywhere only in a certain time and place. We, however, should take care when attempting to theorize this culturally.

It would not be hard to consider the practice of making only one print as part of an effort to appropriate cinema within pre-modern cultural traditions such as *kabuki*, *jōruri*, or other performance or narrative traditions. This echoes Burch's point, but other scholars like Anderson and Komatsu Hiroshi have also emphasized how the *benshi*, for instance, carried on traditions of verbal narration, in part, as with *kowairo* renditions of *kyūha* films, to perfect an illusion of *kabuki* theater.²⁹ I hesitate, however, to call this practice "traditional" or "pre-modern." While I believe this research tells us much about the textual relationship between *benshi* and film, or even between *benshi* and audience, it has to be contextualized within both larger industrial and exhibition practices and contemporary discourses on class and the nation. I would argue that, far from representing the traditional culture of the nation, the practice of one print represents a hybridity which renders problematic notions of culture and nation itself within the modern.

Consider first the critical discourses generated around the practice of making only one print. *Kinema rekōdo*, from soon after the journal's inception, was editorializing against the practice on basically two fronts: industrial and national. First, the problem of one print was cited within a discourse calling for modernization of the industry. In several editorials, the practice was taken as an example of an industry that failed to rationally distinguish the roles of production, distribution, and exhibition, and instead allowed exhibition to rule over the rest.³⁰ That failure was in part related to differences in class. Showman-like exhibitors (note the frequent use of the epithets "kogyōshi" or "yashi"—the latter literally meaning "charlatan") were seen as different in taste and world view from producers, not only catering to the lowest denominator, but also lacking the modern business acumen of the new industrialist. I have noted that this picture was not without foundation—people like

Yamakawa did not exactly fit in high society—but to attack the practice of one print was to attack a wide range of industrial methods which were seen as crass, vulgar, and unfitting of a rising industrialized nation, an assault that was not unrelated to contemporary criticisms of dirty and smelly theaters, bare-chested laborer spectators, or audience tastes as being those of children and nursemaids.³¹ Eliminating the practice was then one part of a larger effort to not only institute a clear division of labor in the industry, introducing to Japan such new independent businesses as “renters” and distributors, but also reverse the existing power structure in light of modern commercial practice and capitalist society. The reformer Kaeriyama Norimasa’s model for the film business was the publishing industry, where publishers/studios would create the product that was distributed to the readers/spectators, leaving it such that “exhibitors are retail book stores.”³²

The problem, however, was not simply industrial. The first mentions of the one print practice in *Kinema rekôdo go* alongside discussions of foreign-made films featuring stories “set” in Japan, and sometimes starring transplanted Japanese actors like Hayakawa Sessue. Criticizing these works, the editors lamented an industry that, far from eyeing the international market by mass producing prints, could not even make more than one print for its home market. By their reasoning, prints had to be reproduced so that truer images of Japan could be sent abroad and understood. In a related argument, that meant, however, that Japanese films must abandon such practices as having the *benshi* bear narrative information, and adopt the international language of cinema already found in the globally successful films of Hollywood and Europe. Both the mass production of images and the adoption of a universal language were thus, in some ways paradoxically, seen as the means by which Japanese cinema could represent the nation—in effect become a national cinema expressing a national culture.

In the eyes of intellectual reformers, then, industry practices such as making only one print were representative, first, of a business culture that was economically unsound and socially vulgar, and second, of a form of local experience that did not further the interests of national or universal culture. Given this criticism, there is the temptation to term the persistence of these kinds of practices as a sign of resistance against such class-based efforts to modernize the nation. One wonders, for instance, whether this situation is not similar to that in Québec described by Germain Lacasse. Lacasse argues that the longevity of the lecturer (*bonimenteur*) in more plebeian venues was a

sign of local resistance against both the dominant high culture that criticized them and the universal pretensions of cinema.³³ The situation in Japan in the 1910s does resemble that which Lacasse details in Québec, to the extent that divisions between class-related cultures overlapped with the opposition between the local and the national/international spheres. However, there are crucial differences which make one hesitate to call the practice of one print a form of resistance. First, while reformers of a socially higher class did strongly criticize these localizing practices, they were in the minority: it was the culture of the *benshi* narrating solely existing prints that was the dominant one in the Japanese film world (though one that would come under increasing pressure towards the end of the decade, not just from reformers, but from censorship officials). Second, I still think there is insufficient evidence that any of these practices like the *benshi* or making one print were operating specifically in opposition to other practices. Komatsu Hiroshi has brought forth evidence of audience discourse that defended such institutions as the *onnagata* against the attacks of reformers, in part by using nation-based reasoning (i.e., arguing that practices such as the *onnagata* are good for Japanese while those promoted by the reformers are good for Westerners).³⁴ But while he rightly notes that the presence of such discourses indicates a multiplicity of conceptions about cinema at the time, when he uses the term “teikô” (resistance, opposition) in describing these discourses, he does not relate them to any culture-wide hegemonic linking and thus does not show them to be anything more than cases of individual defense. It has yet to be sufficiently argued that the institutions themselves were, in conjunction with modes of reception, specifically operating in opposition to Western film cultural practices.³⁵

There are several reasons for arguing that such forms of opposition were unlikely. To begin with, non-Japanese films were still in the majority numerically and were not yet subject to any significant nationalist discourse rejecting their presence or influence (this would only become significant after 1920 in reaction to the Yellow Scare in the United States. A discourse resisting Western film culture would only coalesce in the 1930s in conjunction with the rise of militarism). The greater part of film programs were a mixture of Japanese and Western movies, and thus the latter could not be easily avoided by viewers.³⁶ This then cautions us about concluding that, because *benshi* working with a *shinpa* or *kyûha* film may have depended upon

Japanese narrating traditions, the spectators were engaging in a cinematic experience rendered traditionally Japanese. While they might have expected the *benshi* to fill in for the image in a *kyūha* film, they were perfectly well enjoying another, possibly different kind of semiotic experience with the Western film that invariably played before or afterwards. No research has yet shown that there were discourses existing within reception that clearly demarcated these experiences and marked any as non- or anti-foreign.

The same is true with the issue of the modern. While it is certain that traditional stories, narrative structures, acting styles, and forms of verbal narration were being used by the films and the *benshi* that were narrating them, sometimes to the extent that *kyūha* films were being presented like traditional theater, they were often being offered on the same bill with Charlie Chaplin or Pearl White; at a speed unlike that of *kabuki*; in a space darker than any *kabuki* hall; with benches in a building with, especially in Asakusa, a Western architectural style; and in amusement centers like Asakusa that featured not only neon, noise, and the mass, anonymous urban crowd, but also Asakusa Opera and other Westernized entertainments. In other words, the cinematic experience as a whole in Japan was still participating in some of the modern transformations of time, space, and perception that have been noted of film in Western nations—and which Gonda Yasunosuke claimed as early as 1914 in his writings on film in Japan.³⁷

The fact that only one print was made does imply that film culture in 1910s Japan was less subject to the destruction of the aura of the art object, but it does not mean that this practice was either pre- or anti-modern. Rather, I would contend it was situated in a more complex temporality, mixing modern and pre-modern elements. This included an alternative or competing modern experience occasioned less by massification and Fordism than by the combinations made possible by new technologies and forms of transportation: the unique experience of spatial juxtapositions and mixtures occasioned by international commerce and the photographic image; the new flows and encounters concomitant with the urban crowd and mass transport; the hybridity that arises in a country rapidly transforming in an imperialist world system. Spectators who went to see early film stars like Onoe Matsunosuke or Tachibana Teijirō probably did enjoy the pseudo-theatricality of their *kyūha* and *shimpa* films, but they also were attracted to the mixtures of films, people, spaces, and, in some ways, temporalities of which these works were only a part.

The best way to understand this culture of combination is to recall that what disturbed reformers about contemporary Japanese cinema and its industry was not as much its non-cinematicity as its hybridity. The appellation “*jun’eiga*” (pure film) underlines their advocacy of non-mixture, one defined less as a modernist pursuit of cinematic essence, than a modern advocacy of rationalized divisions and orders. The prospect of cinema imitating theater, of films being shown between theatrical acts (*rensageki*), of silent images being spoken for by a *benshi*, of male actors playing women, of Japanese films playing with Western ones, of a mechanical reproductive technology being used to make only one print—all these implied border crossings that upset the rational organization of perception, experience, and meaning production. They were, however, precisely what many audiences in Japan in the 1910s preferred.

The practice of making one print provides an interesting focal point for analyzing these issues. On the one hand, a one-print film, by not having a transcendental—national or transnational—character through reproduction (where it is the same in different places at the same time), becomes easier to mix and manipulate at the local level because it had no competing existence “elsewhere.” At the same time, it truly made that mixture an event because no other space could have that same component at that time. Advertising and modes of exhibition made audiences aware of the singularity of the event such that, even if one cannot easily prove how conscious spectators were of the lack of other prints, the combination of few prints with recognized local and regional differences in *benshi* style, program length, social milieu, programming, and other factors helped shape modes of reception that had unique and local dimensions.

On the other hand, the uniqueness of the text provided a check on the total chaos mixture could bring. It has been said that the practice of the *benshi* undermined text-based meaning because two *benshi* in different theaters showing the film at the same time could offer different meanings. That, however, was largely untrue because films were rarely subject to different readings at the same time. From week to week, a film’s meaning could shift, as it was combined with different *benshi*, different theaters, and different programs, but for any given time, its status was relatively secure in a unique local combination of reception factors. One print enabled a film to belong to a local space for a time as a singular entity, and thus while it helped local theaters provide unique mixtures, it managed that hybridity by making it more intimate

and possibly more human.

Its localism, however, did not make the practice of one print sit well with those attempting to construct a national culture or cinema. Whether it represented a form of resistance to these nation builders is a matter worth pursuing, but in the least it exemplified the fact that Japanese popular entertainment culture had not been rendered national as of the 1910s. Yet just as the *benshi*, *onnagata*, *rensageki*, and canned theater came under attack from reformist critics as well as government and educational elites, the practice of one print was subject to reform as industry practices changed in the 1920s. The fact that new studios like Shôchiku and Taikatsu announced their intention to aim for the international market—an aim one must admit was never realized—signaled their desire to move away from one print culture and enter the realm of a national cinema operating through universal forms of signification and industrial rationality. It was at this time that companies actually began producing more than one print as a matter of regular business practice.

Yet just as the *benshi* took a long time to disappear (although the institution was subject to change and reform in the meantime), the number of prints would stay low until WWII, as studios still persisted in opting for mass production of titles over mass production of prints.³⁸ This persistence of the local—of cultural and industrial hybridity—was probably one reason cinema would remain socially inferior in the eyes of government and cultural elites; its practices, after all, did not represent the nation well. And it also provides a background for why, after the Film Law in 1939, the attempt to construct a nationalist cinema was conjoined with an industrial reform aimed at reducing the number of titles and increasing the number of prints.³⁹ If one accepts that the material conditions for the formation of a cinema capable of serving a national “imagined community” include a centralized, top-down industrial structure; the availability of theaters for most of the populace; a large number of prints for each film; and a film language understandable not only by the national citizenry but by non-citizens (who then recognize those films as a product of that nation), I would argue that most of these conditions were only met—and only then contradictorily met—in Japan during and after WWII. Only after this time could one imagine a Japanese national cinema finally being mechanically reproduced.

Endnotes

¹ A shorter version of this paper was delivered in English at the Society of Cinema Studies, Chicago, Illinois, on 10 March 2000. A Japanese version, “Fukusei gijutsu jidai no wan purinto,” was later given to the Nihon Eigashi Kenkyūkai at Meiji Gakuin University, Tōkyō, 25 April 2000. I would like to thank the

participants of both sessions for their questions and comments. After receiving comments from some anonymous readers, a revised version was published on the internet film studies journal, *Screening the Past*: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screeningthepast/>. This is a slightly expanded version of that paper.

² “Shin-kyūha eiga no satsuei nissū to satsuei hiyō,” *Katsudō no sekai* 2.9 (September 1917), 55.

³ The June 1917 *Katsudō no sekai* gives the price per foot as 8.5 sen for negative and 7.8 sen for positive: “Honpo ni okeru hirumu no yunyū to kakō,” *Katsudō no sekai* 2.6 (June 1917), 32. Note that such numbers underline the fact that for a 4000 foot film, very little film was shot that was not used ($4000 \times 7.8 = 31200$ sen or 312 yen).

⁴ For instance, Tanaka Junichirō quotes the pioneer director Makino Shōzō describing the practice in the days of Yokota Shōkai (before 1912) in *Nihon eiga hattatsushi* (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōronsha, 1975), vol. 1: 176; and the editorial “Ōbei gekidan to Tōyō no geki” laments the same practice in 1914: *Kinema rekōdo* 2.9 (March 1914), 2-3

⁵ The subcontracting agreement between Tenkatsu and Kobayashi Kisaburō and Yamakawa Yoshitarō specified three prints per film: Tanaka 238. It is not certain whether this term of this short-lived contract was obeyed.

⁶ “Mukōjima satsueijō kenkyū,” *Katsudō no sekai* 3.10 (October 1918), 29. The article does not mention whether the extra prints were made at the time of the film’s release or later, after the film’s success.

⁷ Even *Katsudō no sekai* would give different numbers in 1918 in its more specific reviews of Nikkatsu (in October) and Tenkatsu (in December). They, however, still confirmed the fact that the cost of film stock accounted for a significant portion of the budget.

⁸ The increase in price is one reason Tenkatsu, which was founded in order to produce films in Japan using Charles Urban’s Kinemacolor process, abandoned producing Kinemacolor pictures, since the process used twice as much film as a regular camera.

⁹ In August 1918, *Katsudō no sekai* reported twelve-reel programs as the norm for high-class theaters, sixteen for lower ranking city and Japanese-film-centered cinemas, and phenomenal five to six hour programs (up to twenty-four reels!) as the fad in Ōsaka and the countryside. “Naigai Katsudō jōsetsukan no bangumi,” *Katsudō no sekai* 3.8 (August 1918), 30-31.

¹⁰ See “Nikkatsu Kyōto satsueijō kenkyū” (p. 34) and “Mukōjima satsueijō kenkyū” (p. 27) in *Katsudō no sekai* 3.10 (October 1918). According to a 1915 *Kinema Rekōdo* report, this incredible rate of production left little time for staff to rest (there was only one day off a month) or even see their own work: Hazuo Akatsuki, “Nikkatsu Kyōto satsueijō no kigen oyobi enkaku: Daigo-shin, soshiki oyobi genjō,” *Kinema Rekōdo* 30 (December 1915): 14.

¹¹ Nikkatsu was making more *kyūha* films per month than any single theater could show, given that even theaters that concentrated on Japanese films at best showed one *kyūha* and one *shimpa* in any program.

¹² *Nikkatsu yonjūnen-shi* (Tōkyō: Nikkatsu Kabushiki Kaisha, 1952).

¹³ “Tenkatsu Kaisha no genjō,” *Katsudō no sekai* 3.12 (December 1918), 8.

¹⁴ See “Nikkatsu no genjō,” *Katsudō no sekai* 3.10 (October 1918), 11; and “Tenkatsu Kaisha no enkaku,” *Katsudō no sekai*

3.12 (December 1918), 4. Other companies like M. Kashii and Universal, as well as independent operators, made up the remaining number in the grand total of about 500 theaters in the country (including Korea, Taiwan, and other possessions) as of July 1918 (“Zenkoku katsudô shashin jôsetsukan ichiranhyô,” *Katsudô no sekai* 3.8 (August 1918): 75).

¹⁵ The September 1917 *Katsudô no sekai* adds the *benshi* and equipment to the costs the company sometimes had to bear while the magazine’s December 1918 issue only states the company was responsible for one projectionist and one clerk.

¹⁶ “Nikkatsu no genjô”, 11.

¹⁷ It is important to remember that the income a company received for a program of films it provided, regardless of which kind of contract, had to in effect be divided among several films, since the average bill consisted of several features and shorts.

¹⁸ One other reason is the fact that two of Nikkatsu’s top theaters, Tôkyô’s Chiyoda-kan and Ôsaka’s Ashibe Kurabu, were *buai* houses. Thus not all *buai* theaters were less-powerful rural houses.

¹⁹ *Katsudô no sekai* uses the case of Kobayashi, which was able to acquire some fifty theaters within a year of its inception, to illustrate the weakness of other producers and the mobility of theaters: “Eigyôjô ni okeru jôsetsukan to kaisha to no kankei,” *Katsudô no sekai* 2.9 (September 1917), 68.

²⁰ See “Zenkoku katsudô shashin jôsetsukan ichiranhyô,” *Katsudô no sekai* 3.8 (August 1918), 84. The fact Kôfu had only those two theaters in 1918 probably made that a smart business decision, even though it was also not uncommon at the time to see a town with only two or three theaters that were all contracted to Nikkatsu.

²¹ This observation is echoed both by contemporary critics of the industry (for instance, *Kinema rekôdo*’s editorial “Kaku arubeki katsudôkai,” *Kinema rekôdo* no. 20 (February 1915), 2) and later historians (see Tanaka, 225). Imamura Kanae, following Shibata Yoshio, cites the post-WWII democratization of stock holdings as one of the crucial factors enabling production to free itself economically of the demands of exhibitors: Imamura, *Eiga sangyô* (Tôkyô: Yûhikaku, 1960), 64; Shibata, *Eiga no keizaigaku* (Toyohashi-shi: Eigakai Kenkyûjô, 1954), 13.

²² See, for instance, Naoki Sanjûgo, “Nihon eiga oyobi eigakai,” in *Naoki Sanjûgo zenshû* (Tôkyô: Kaizôsha, 1935), vol. 31: 208-216.

²³ This situation changed after WWII when inflation sparked a boom in the construction of theaters, which were now less regulated. The resulting surplus of theaters, putting suppliers in the better bargaining position, was another factor in enabling producers to finally dominate over exhibitors. See Imamura, 152.

²⁴ See “Tenkatsu Nippori kyûha satsueijô kenkyû,” *Katsudô no sekai* 3.12 (December 1918), 14.

²⁵ Technically, Nikkatsu did not end up with Kinemacolor because Fukuhôdô had bought the rights secretly and did not reveal that to Nikkatsu. But that must mean that the rights were purchased not by the corporate entity “Fukuhôdô” which was bought by Nikkatsu, but by the individuals who ended up using it later at Tenkatsu.

²⁶ For more on Tenkatsu, see Hiroshi Komatsu, “From Natural Colour to the Pure Motion Picture Drama: The Meaning of Tenkatsu Company in the 1910s of Japanese Film History,” *Film History* 7.1 (1995), 69-86.

²⁷ See “Tenkatsu Ôsaka satsueijô,” *Katsudô no sekai* 3.12 (December 1918), 20-23.

²⁸ This value was not just ascribed to Japanese films. The term “fukiri” was first attributed to imported films shown just after being unloaded from the boat and unpacked or unsealed (*fukirareta*). In general, there was usually only one print of foreign films as well, although there were exceptions with pirated films, or in cases when different companies bought prints of the same film from different foreign dealers (conflicts over exhibition rights would plague the industry until the nationalization of censorship in 1925 helped regulate exhibition rights).

²⁹ See J. L. Anderson, “Spoken Silents in the Japanese Cinema; or, Talking to Pictures: Essaying, the Katsuben, Contextualizing the Texts,” in *Re-Framing Japanese Cinema*, eds. Arthur Noletti, Jr. and David Desser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 259-311; and Komatsu Hiroshi and Frances Loden, “Mastering the Mute Image: The Role of the *Benshi* in Japanese Cinema,” *iris* no. 22 (Autumn 1996), 33-52.

³⁰ See “Kaku aru beki katsudôkai,” 2; and “Kaku aru beki katsudôkai (shôzen),” *Kinema rekôdo* 21 (March 1915), 2.

³¹ For more on the class issues involved in film reform in the 1910s, see my Ph.D. dissertation, “Writing a Pure Cinema: Articulations of Early Japanese Film” (University of Iowa, 1996).

³² Kaeriyama Norimasa, “Katsudô shashin no shakaiteki chii oyobi sekimu,” *Kinema rekôdo* 41 (November 1916): 479.

³³ See Germain Lecasse, “Du bonimenteur québécois comme pratique résistante,” *iris* no. 22 (Autumn 1996), 53-66.

³⁴ Komatsu Hiroshi, «Hisutoriogurafi to gainen no fukusûsei: Taikatsu o rekishikasuru tame ni,» *Eigagaku* 13 (1999), 2-11.

³⁵ The discourse of censors at the time reveals a concern for the possibility of class-based readings of films (by *benshi* or by spectators) that were antagonistic to status quo values. This is an important issue worthy of more study, but it clearly is not one reducible to the opposition between traditional/modern or Japan/West.

³⁶ In the mid-1910s, a small number of “high-class” urban theaters began offering foreign-film-only programs, partially in response to the desire of some audiences to avoid the vulgar Japanese fare. In this way, the manner by which Western films were shown at certain venues could serve as a marker of social divisions within Japan.

³⁷ Gonda, for instance, saw in film the end of art as “quiet, excellent, calm, rare, unique, or the non-practical” and the beginning of a beauty that is “mobile, stupendous, majestic, organized, and practical”: Gonda Yasunosuke, *Katsudô shashin no genri oyobi ôyô* (Tôkyô: Uchida Rôkakuhô, 1914), 453. For my analysis of his conception of film, see “Gonda Yasunosuke to kankyaku no eiga bunmei,” *Media-shi kenkyû* 10 (2000), 1-15.

³⁸ While Home Ministry censorship records show an average of five to ten prints for films in the 1930s, by the late 1930s, the industry as a whole was producing over five hundred titles a year, a figure that in some years made it the top producer in the world. This was not a source of pride for industry observers and government regulators, who considered the overproduction of such cheap films a sign of the backwardness of the industry.

³⁹ During the war, government officials used both the Film Law and their monopoly over film stock to consolidate the industry, reduce the number of films made, and increase the quantity of prints. The September 1941 agreement between regulators and the industry that merged the ten existing companies into three also stipulated a total production rate for the industry of six films a month, with thirty prints per film (doubling the then average figure).