

Japan's Quest for Cinematic Realism from the Perspective of Cultural Dialogue
between Japan and Soviet Russia, 1925-1955

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This dissertation explores Japan's continuous quest for cinematic realism from the perspective of its cultural dialogue with Soviet cinema. By examining pivotal interactions that occurred between Japanese and Soviet filmmakers, critics and audiences from 1925 to 1955, it purports that realism was the constant concern of and chief moving force behind the Soviet-Japanese cinematic exchanges – including mutual distribution of films, co-productions and adaptations of specific cinematic techniques. The dissertation begins with an introduction to Yuri Lotman's theory of cultural dialogue between “transmitting” and “receiving” cultures. According to Lotman's framework, in the course of their interactions, two cultures influence one another, inevitably evolve and ultimately switch their positions. Lotman proposes five phases that precede the eventual transformation of a “peripheral” receiving culture into the “central” transmitting culture. Each chapter of this dissertation discusses events that correspond to the phases of cultural dialogue as theorized by Lotman, and appropriately applies this framework as a lens for better understanding cinematic relations between Japan and Soviet Russia. Thus, it unravels the process through which Japanese cinema evolved from being fascinated with the documentarian techniques and realistic qualities of avant-garde Soviet cinema in the late 1920s and early 1930s, to becoming recognized

as the epitome of cinematic realism by the midcentury Soviet press.

Chapter 1 addresses the reception of Soviet cinema in late 1920s and early 1930s Japan. First, it discusses the indispensable role played by the Soviet public organization, VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Abroad), in fostering the cinematic exchanges between the two countries. The representatives of VOKS in Japan, Evgenii Spal'vin and Mikhail Galkovich, alongside Japanese journalist and interpreter, Fukuro Ippei, are identified as the key figures behind the organization of film screenings and exhibitions of film posters. After revealing the censorship measures applied to the imported Soviet films, this chapter affirms that in prewar Japan, the advances of Soviet cinema were largely associated with documentary cinema, rather than with fiction. In the minds of Japanese intellectuals, Soviet cinema was associated with realism, not only because the majority of Soviet films released in Japan in the early 1930s were documentaries, but because such influential concepts as “proletarian realism” and “machine realism” were formed under the influence of Marxist ideology and Soviet avant-garde. The “realistic” image of Soviet cinema was also reinforced by the fact that nearly half of Soviet documentaries distributed in prewar Japan were travelogues depicting the East. Alongside *Storm Over Asia* (1929) and *The Road to Life* (1931) featuring likable protagonists portrayed by Asian actors, travelogues like *Turksib* (1929) and *Pamir* (1928) contributed to the formation of a “realistic” image of Soviet cinema that uncovers and propagates the real face of rising Asia.

Japanese intellectuals' high expectations about the documentary techniques and powerful international connections of Soviet cinema were reflected in Shochiku

Film Studio's attempt to entrust Vsevolod Pudovkin with the making of a "truthful" documentary about Japan and distributing it abroad. Although this plan was never realized, it laid the foundation for the creation of the first Soviet-Japanese co-production project *Big Tokyo* (1933), discussed in Chapter 2. Directed by Soviet documentary filmmaker, Vladimir Shneiderov, *Big Tokyo* is the first Soviet picture to be filmed in Japan, as well as one of the first Soviet "talkies." The film's soundtrack, however, was recorded in Moscow, under the direction of prominent Japanese musician, Yamada Kōsaku. The filming process itself was supported financially and coordinated by *Tokyo Asahi*, one of the biggest newspapers in Japan. The sudden arrival of a Soviet film crew in Tokyo provided Japanese intellectuals with an opportunity to explore whether the Soviet filmmaking approach would remain as appealing when transplanted to Japanese soil.

As revealed in the analysis of both Soviet and Japanese contemporary press and archival materials, Shneiderov's film was generally considered a failure despite high expectations. The reasons behind this are both political and cultural. The diplomatic changes triggered by Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933 affected Soviet filmmakers' attitude towards the project. Combined with Soviet audiences' lack of awareness about Japanese sound culture, this led to professional decisions made by Yamada Kōsaku being altered to the point that *Big Tokyo* could not meet the cinematic preferences of Japanese viewers. The Japanese release of *Big Tokyo* coincided with the intensification of anti-Marxist policies and the rise of public concern for the establishment of governmental control over the production of internationally acceptable

cinematic image of Japan. It is plausible that *Big Tokyo* was partially responsible for these serious changes experienced by Japanese society.

Chapter 3 discusses documentary films produced by Japanese filmmaker Kamei Fumio during WWII. In 1929-1931 Kamei studied filmmaking in the Soviet Union and later incorporated a number of cinematic techniques developed by Soviet avant-garde filmmakers into his own works. Not unlike his Japanese contemporaries who did not visit the Soviet Union and were introduced to Soviet cinema through rare film screenings, poster exhibitions and the translations of Soviet theoretical writings, Kamei was fascinated by the Soviet montage, documentary cinema, and travelogues during his stay in Leningrad. Just as for Sergei Eisenstein and other prominent Soviet directors, Kamei's filmmaking career began in reediting foreign films for Soviet consumption. Although Kamei used to deny a direct relationship between his films and the works of Sergei Eisenstein, there are undeniable similarities between the cinematic styles adopted by the two. Thus, Kamei relied on the depiction of recurring objects and geometrical motifs as a means of uniting his films – a cinematic technique often seen in the works of Sergei Eisenstein.

By analyzing Kamei's works, including *Shanghai* (1938), *Peking* (1938), *Fighting Soldiers* (1939) and *Kobayashi Issa* (1941), this chapter reveals how Kamei adapted the cinematic techniques designed to propagate the advances of communism in order to meet the needs of Japan's colonial project and subvert it. Kamei became known for combining the principles of Soviet montage with the aesthetics of long takes, long shots and haiku poetry, and in so doing Kamei instilled the Soviet methods of

filmmaking in Japanese film culture, reestablishing them as a set of “Japanese” cinematic techniques that could be later referred to and reinterpreted by the forthcoming generations of filmmakers. At the same time, the Soviet roots of Kamei’s techniques also made them familiar and accessible to Soviet filmmakers like Alexander Sokurov, making Kamei the ultimate cultural mediator between Japanese and Soviet cinema.

Chapter 4 addresses postwar Japan’s reception of Soviet cinema in the time that the nation was occupied by American forces. Socialist Realist Soviet films released in postwar Japan were radically different from Soviet avant-garde, which had been highly influential among Japanese intellectuals in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Still, these films were able to gain commercial success largely because they acted as a substitute for Japan’s patriotism oppressed during the years of occupation. By analyzing the Soviet films released in postwar Japan; the methods of propagating Soviet cinema employed by the specialized magazine, *Soveto Eiga (Soviet Cinema, 1950-1954)*; and the personal materials of renowned filmmaker, collector and scholar, Makino Mamoru, this chapter describes how the reception, propagation and distribution of Soviet cinema served as a means of preserving a sense of Japan’s national identity undeniably shattered by the experience of devastating war and occupation.

Soviet cinema’s optimism, mass-oriented simplicity and preoccupation with the future resonated well with the popular rhetoric of “brightness” and the slogans for constructing a new culture of “peace,” which became extremely widespread in postwar Japan. The ability to watch formerly prohibited Soviet cinema depicting life in a distant communist state enabled the Japanese audiences to embrace the “newness” of the

postwar era. At the same time, the ideals proclaimed by the Soviet cinema – which include the superiority of the collective over the individual; the anti-Western, anti-modernist stance; the frequent reference to the cultural traditions and folklore; the glorification of things “appropriate” and “healthy” and the negation of cinema’s inherent eroticism – were in many ways reminiscent to the ones that were affirmed by the wartime Japanese cinema. Thus, Soviet films that gained popularity in postwar Japan often acted as a link between Japan’s past and future. Leftist Japanese filmmakers and critics who advocated for the release of Socialist Realist Soviet films understood the flaws of these highly ideological and overly simplified works. Still, they were inspired by the Marxist idea of “people’s art,” as well as by the Soviet cinema’s attempt to fast-forward the arrival of “bright” future by visually imagining it.

Chapter 5 addresses the ways in which Japanese filmmakers adapted the principles of Socialist Realism to the political and cultural specificities of postwar Japan by analyzing Kamei Fumio’s *Woman Walking Alone on the Earth* (*Onna hitori daichi o yuku*, 1953) and its reception in both Japan and the USSR. Kamei’s film, depicting the life of a female coal miner, became the first Japanese film to be commercially distributed in the Soviet Union. Repeatedly characterized by the Soviet press as being “progressive” and “realistic,” Kamei’s film not only helped to promote Japan as a possible Soviet ally, but also contributed to the abolition of an un-cinematic image of Japanese cinema that existed in the Soviet Union through the 1920s. Furthermore, the release of Kamei’s films could be seen as a “forerunner” of the Soviet cinema’s resurrection during the Khrushchev Thaw.

Woman Walking Alone on the Earth relied on literary schemes that were highly familiar to the Soviet audiences and propagated the same principles that were promulgated by the Soviet media: the importance of international cooperation, workers' solidarity and women's liberation, the condemnation of war, capitalism and Western culture, the predominance of the collective over the personal. At the same time, this film also employed cinematic techniques and contained depictions that were exceedingly different from the Soviet norm. The film's sexual connotations, which violated the accepted social construction of a student-mentor relationship, for instance, were perceived by the Soviet censors as being too radical, and were eliminated. Still, the Soviet version of Kamei's film maintained a number of features that made it stand out from the un-cinematic mass of Socialist Realist Soviet cinema. The characters' unconventional body gestures and social behavior, the camera's mobility and the depiction of nudity in Kamei's film entered Soviet theaters and thus signaled the arrival of the new era in Soviet filmmaking. This chapter shows how Japanese cinema, once steeped in the Soviet documentary tradition, turned into a "sending culture," powerful and authoritative enough to influence the Soviet filmmakers' understanding of documentary and realism.

The dissertation confirms the hybridity of Japanese cinema, which despite its popular image of the "cultural Other" has developed by absorbing the experience of other national cinemas. Soviet film and theory played a decisive role in developing Japan's documentary and leftist filmmaking, Japanese culture became a significant source of inspiration for Soviet montage theory and postwar Japanese cinema affected

the revival of Soviet cinema in the mid-1950s. The dissertation also pronounces the importance of music in fostering cinematic interactions between Japan and the Soviet Union. Oftentimes, cultural exchanges between the two countries in the realm cinema were initiated by Japan's interest in Russian music, which was praised for its aptly balanced combination of the European classics and the music of various national groups co-existing within the Soviet borders. Soviet authorities' official propagation of racial solidarity and preservation of cultural traditions unique to specific ethnicities living in the USSR also served as a decisive factor behind the Japanese filmmakers, critics and audiences' engagement in a cultural dialogue with the Soviet cinema. Soviet cinema's preoccupation with differentiating itself from the cinematic tradition of the West was frequently proclaimed by Japanese viewers as one the Soviet cinema's strongest appeals.

In theorizing the development of cultural dialogue between the "receiving" and "sending" cultures, Lotman presumes an intrinsic political, economic and cultural inequality existing between the two parties. The relationship between the Soviet and the Japanese cinema, however, does not reflect this assumption. On a global scale, neither Soviet nor Japanese cinema had ever occupied the cultural "center" of filmmaking. At certain points in world film history, both national cinemas did become highly influential among specialized, narrow groups of intellectuals. Since WWI, however, the world "center" of popular filmmaking had been situated in Hollywood. In that sense, the history of cinematic interactions between Japan and the Soviet Union could be seen as a cultural dialogue between two "peripheries" trying to learn from each other's

experience of resisting “the center.” Thus, realism – the moving force behind the three decades-long dialogue between the Soviet and the Japanese filmmakers – could be interpreted as a style that creates an aesthetic and/or ideological alternative to Hollywood. From the late 1920s to the early 1950s Japanese leftist filmmakers, critics and viewers were generally dissatisfied with the way Japanese social, cultural and racial specificities were represented by the mainstream (western-influenced Japanese cinema and Hollywood). Their anxieties were reflected in a cultural dialogue with Soviet cinema, which offered them an alternative path for pursuing the desired realism.