

## Special Feature

# What We've Got Here Is a Failure to Communicate?: Facing Forward to the Future of Japanese Cinema Studies

Daisuke Miyao

"[T]he era of dialogue and debate among scholars in the field is largely over." Markus Nornes thus laments in his review of recently-published three volumes on Japanese cinema: *The Japanese Cinema Book* (2020), *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Cinema* (2020), and *A Companion to Japanese Cinema* (2022). While being impressed by the quality of their scholarship and for the fact of interdisciplinary diversity that there is no overlap between the ninety-one essays that "embrace approaches from every angle imaginable" in these three books, Nornes states, "the lack of dialogue between the articles is striking." "Today," continues Nornes, "everyone is doing something fascinating, but they are basically doing their own thing," which makes him "nostalgic for the vital disagreements in the early days of the field" (Nornes 2022, n.p.)

I cannot agree with him more especially after attending two recent online conferences in the field of Japanese studies in a row, which were full of stimulating papers but regrettably had little time for discussions. (I'd like to note that the online symposium, "GSICCS Colloquium: COVID-19 and Japanese Studies," hosted by Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto was not the case. We had plenty of time for inspiring conversations.) I must admit that I am rather jealous of Nornes's nostalgia toward the founding days of the discipline of film studies when "the debates were lively," which I didn't have a chance to experience. But at the same time, I also want to think about the present and the future. What future do we point to? What dialogues do we want to have? To answer these questions, I want to ask a historiographic question so that I could examine the past to position myself facing forward. What dialogues have I wanted to have?

When I started my graduate study in Japan in the early 1990s, film studies had not achieved institutional visibility there. While film studies had been taught at a few universities, including Waseda and Nihon University, the most visible program was the unit of

Interdisciplinary Study of Culture and Representation (Hyōshō Bunka) at the Liberal Arts Department of the University of Tokyo, which was established in 1986. Under the leadership of Hasumi Shigehiko, arguably the most influential film critic in Japan at that time, the program declared to study film as a constellation of “pictorial phenomena from drawing through computer graphics” and to invite not just the usual panoply of Western approaches (linguistics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, gender theory) but a new “scientific scholarship” specific to the image. Hasumi called his approach “surface criticism” (*hyōsō hihyō*). Separating his work from a dominant type of film criticism in Japan, i.e. the impressionist reading in which educated critics thematically and subjectively express their ways of reception, Hasumi proposed to pay attention only to what was visible on the surface of the screen. Hasumi’s 1983 book, *Director Ozu Yasujiro (Kantoku Ozu Yasujiro)*, was the perfect example of his “surface criticism.” Citing the works on Ozu by Donald Richie and Paul Schrader, among others, Hasumi attacked their “traditionalist” views. For instance, Hasumi criticized the readings of the shot of a vase in *Late Spring (Banshun, 1949)* offered by Richie and Schrader saying that the shot should not be called a shot of a vase. Hasumi listed many other things visible on the screen: the *shōji* screen, the shadows on the *shōji* screen, etc. Hasumi argued that Ozu was conscious of the capabilities and limits of cinema as a medium. Hasumi’s examples of Ozu’s consciousness about the limits of cinema included the peculiar eye-line matches that would refuse the illusion of looking while his examples of Ozu’s belief in the capabilities of cinema included various “themes” (*shudai*) or fragments (*danpen*), such as eating, changing clothes, or looking, that Ozu consistently adopted in his films but exceeded the linearity of the narrative or the intellectual reading. For Hasumi, as Aaron Gerow states, “Cinema is what is here, now, relating at best only to a past cinematic moment, but in such a way that time – and all that is not there, such as history – is irrelevant” (Gerow 2018, 52).

Without a doubt, it was Hasumi’s writings that taught me how to look at the images on the screen attentively. It was Hasumi’s book that opened a gate for me to explore the enchanting world of Ozu. I did take courses taught by Hasumi and, under his influence, watched many films at various mini-theaters. But I was equally attracted to the political, historical, or categorical reading of films. One book that I was intrigued by then (and I still am) was Robert Sklar’s 1975 book, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. In this book, Sklar combines ethnic studies (Jewish immigrants), industrial studies of Hollywood, the US political history, and the technological history of cinema to examine the formation of the film culture in the United States. Because Sklar’s book does not have the close textual analysis of individual films as does Hasumi or David Bordwell, whose books I was introduced to in the seminar taught by Matsuura Hisaki, Hasumi’s colleague, I wondered how a combination of the two would be possible. So, that was the

first dialogue that I hoped for.

It didn't seem to me that the separate approaches that Hasumi and Sklar were taking were caused only by their different methodological standpoints in film studies. It seemed to be an issue of area studies: Hasumi in French (and Japanese) theory and Sklar in American studies. In the end, I did not go to Hyōshō Bunka but decided to study with Sklar at NYU Cinema Studies. In retrospect, I was somewhat uncomfortable with the rather ahistorical and politically unconscious tendency of the "surface criticism" (and was a little scared of being dismissed by Hasumi because of my fondness for films that he did not approve of!)

One year after I arrived in New York, NYU Cinema Studies faced a challenge: the Sokal affair, in which a physics professor published a paper in the spring/summer 1996 issue of *Social Text*, a cultural studies journal edited by such scholars as Frederic Jameson and Andrew Ross, and called the paper a "hoax" after three weeks of its publication. Since my arrival, I had sensed a break between two methodological (or even ethical?) standpoints within the department: cinema as an art form vs. cinema as a social practice. The Sokal affair seemed to reveal the antagonism between professors who found their inspiration from art history/theory and professors who were practicing cultural studies. There were many workshops in which professors from both sides debated the validity of their theories and practices. For a graduate student who was new to the field, it was not only a dialogue that was expected (close textual analysis vs. socio-historical examination) but was a thrilling scene of a debate that was seemingly facing forward, toward the future of cinema studies.

Unfortunately, the dialogue did not last long at the department level. Some professors left there, and some students decided to take on rather positivist (*jisshō-shugi*) research at archives instead. But many students felt being passed the torch and continued that dialogue in their research, especially those who delved into the study of Early Cinema, a flourishing field at that time. Especially after the publication of Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), it was clear that the paradigm had changed from monologic semiotics of cinema to dialogic experiences of cinema. The works of Ben Singer, Giorgio Bertellini, Alison Griffiths, and Frances Guerin, among others, were the representatives of the paradigm shift. My dissertation on Sessue Hayakawa, which was supervised by Sklar and eventually became my first monograph in 2007, tremendously owes the dialogue that those senior colleagues of mine continued to connect and integrate art history/theory, and cultural studies, as well as close textual analysis.

If there had been a lack of communication at NYU, that was between the Department of Cinema Studies, where I belonged, and the Department of Film and TV. It was between film studies and filmmaking. I was so fortunate to have a filmmaker

roommate in Film and TV that I was able to talk with him about what we were learning at each department and share information about events. But I could not understand the lack of interaction between them. How could scholars study films without communicating with filmmakers? Later I realized that it was (and is) the innate problem of cinema studies in general. Despite cinema's intrinsic status as a technological medium, analyses of how narratives and styles are realized with what technologies during actual filmmaking have received less attention partly because film studies is a relatively new discipline and scholars in other areas of the humanities – literature, history, or area studies – have studied films based on their disciplinary frameworks. Thus, this became the second dialogue that I hoped for.

The other lack of dialogue I recognized was between film studies and Japanese studies. As Nornes addresses, when the discipline of film studies was formed in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars such as Stephen Heath, David Bordwell, Dudley Andrew, and Noël Burch deployed Japanese films as their objects of study. By the time I arrived in New York, it had been a while since the founding generation had moved on to other parts of the world, such as Hong Kong, and subsequently moved away from the national cinema paradigm, the study of Japanese film had been marginalized. Yet ironically, contrary to the rising trend of studying cinema as a transnational cultural medium, in reality, I was automatically expected to talk about Japanese national cinema because I originally came from Japan. I started to understand what it feels like to find oneself outside of a dominant culture in academic and social communities. I hate to admit this, but from time to time I had to play a role of a model minority and talked about generalized or popularized views on Japan that were expected. Around the same time, Japanese area studies started to open up to embrace popular culture, including cinema. But such incorporation was not profound. At meetings on Japanese studies, in which I had never been trained, I became expected to add a popular perspective as an expert on Japanese films because I was from Cinema Studies. Colleen Laird correctly observes:

To many students the “Japanese” part of “Japanese” film is in equal measure the most prohibitive and the most engaging aspect of the class. As so many of the commonly taught films feature prominent aspects of “Japanese tradition” (more on this to follow), classroom dynamics fall into explanation of Japanese culture (either by the instructor or “savvy” students) as almost a matter of course....Additionally, teachers also face the problem of students' varying background in and familiarity with film studies—terminology, history, form, theory, and analysis, particularly for students who take Japanese Film courses to fulfill a distribution requirement (Laird 2010, n.p.).

How could we talk about Japanese films without marginalizing “Japanese” in film studies and “films” in Japanese studies? This became my third question about dialogue.

In retrospect, my second monograph, *The Aesthetics of Shadow: Lighting and Japanese Cinema* (2013), was my attempt to initiate those dialogues. I wanted to explore ways toward substantial communication between critical studies of cinema and film production practices. At the same time, I tried to locate Japanese cinema in an international and/or transnational network of film culture. Around the same time, I had an opportunity to edit *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema* (2014). My desire to foster these conversations was much clearer then. In the anthology’s introduction, I pointed out three types of marginalization of Japanese cinema: marginalized in film and media studies as one regional cinema, marginalized in area studies as one area of cultural studies and marginalized by the Japanese governmental policies as non-useful for the commodification of cinema. Then I addressed, “Our ambition has been to build a bridge and foster dialogue among Japanese scholars of Japanese cinema, film scholars of Japanese cinema based in Anglo-American and European countries, film scholars of non-Japanese cinema, non-film scholars including a scholar of another discipline, a film archivist, and a film producer who is familiar with film scholarship.”

I regret that I was not able to succeed in inviting any filmmakers as contributors. The late Aoyama Shinji was one of my top choices. Being not only a successful filmmaker on a popular level and an award-winning author, Aoyama was also a rare figure who could write both to academic and non-academic readers of cinema (and beyond). His eagerness to engage in scholarly conversations in English-speaking academia was evident in his response to our presentations at an NYU symposium that Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto hosted in April 2005. With a high hope to discuss transnational film history with him, I examined Aoyama’s 2001 film *Desert Moon* (*Tsuki no sabaku*) in conjunction with Karl Grune’s film *The Street* (*Die Straße*, 1922), Ozu’s *Tokyo Twilight* (*Tokyo boshoku*, 1957), and Jack Clayton’s *The Great Gatsby* (1974). All these films use a billboard/advertising board of two big human eyes as a prop, which enhances the sense of surveillance as a thematic motif. Locating Aoyama’s film in the genealogy of “street films” since the 1920s Germany, I called Aoyama a “street fighting man.” It was also a reference to Aoyama’s another film, *To the Street: The Film that Nakagami Kenji Left* (*Rojō e: Nakagami Kenji no nokoshita firumu*, 2001), as well as his expertise in rock music. In his response, Aoyama not only explained that he had been aware of all those three films but also expanded my scope to film noir and American new cinema by showing clips from the opening scenes of Nicholas Ray’s *In a Lonely Place* (1950) and Martine Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), in which the protagonists’ eyes in both films (Humphrey Bogart and Robert De Niro) are emphasized by being captured in back mirrors of the cars that they drive at night. In addition to the theme of

surveillance, Aoyama pointed out the theme of fragmented human bodies and senses in modern urban settings. I wanted (and still want) this kind of dialogue that could lead to future products for both scholars and filmmakers. Collaboration. Coproduction. Call it what you want. That night, Aoyama san said to me at a bar of the Washington Square Hotel, “See you again” (Mata aimashō). I am sorry that I can’t do that any longer.

If we look at the numbers alone, the future is bright. Ninety-one diverse topics have appeared in three volumes of Japanese cinema back to back to back. Speaking of my institution (UCSD), nearly 2,000 undergraduate students are studying the Japanese language. Japanese film courses are fully enrolled with 300+ students. The field of Japanese cinema studies is flourishing. But I must say that the last two types of dialogues that I wanted – between theory and practice and between film studies and Japanese studies – are yet to come nearly a decade after the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*. I have started to wonder. I want to ask Markus Nornes, myself, my colleagues, and my students, “Do we really want to have dialogues?” Are we going to discuss “Japanese” “cinema”?

In reality, most of our undergraduate students take Japanese language and Japanese film courses for their general education requirements. They come to our class because they like anime and Sony or Nintendo games. They are web-experienced viewers who are growing up in a time when viewership of cinema, as well as TV series, is declining. Streaming is the primary distribution and exhibition platform. The tide has changed. The conception of the cinema of the previous decades is no longer valid for them. I am only talking about my impression based on my personal experiences who is working in a department of literature and a Japanese studies program at a public research institution whose major strength is science. I understand that more substantial research is necessary to discuss the general tendency. But how is it possible to formulate constructive communication when both parties do not have a common ground? Well, as David Bordwell suggests we can now talk about “paying for the experience” of cinema, though, in contrast to the period between 1980 and 2020 when films were consumer artifacts as VHS and DVD (Bordwell 2022, n.p.). Practically, to initiate dialogues, what I have been attempting is to ask my students is to pick one scene that impressed them most from the film assigned for the week, to explain how and why that particular scene is impressive to them, and to refer to the section from an assigned reading of the week that they think is relevant to their argument. In addition to this weekly journal assignment, I ask them to pick one Japan-related film that they want to be included in this class in the future and to explain why by following the format of the weekly journal.

Moreover, many of our graduate students do not work solely in Japanese studies. Transnational, trans-Asian, transpacific, trans-local, etc. This is certainly an invaluable



legacy of the scholarship in the previous decades, including the works by Masao Miyoshi, Harry Harootunian, Naoki Sakai, and Oguma Eiji to name a few, which questioned the notion of nation and the discipline of area studies. But how is it possible to develop a specific argument when we presume everything is relative or in relation? I would like to know what exactly this “trans” is before we/they use it. For instance, amid the Anpo protests (*Anpo tōsō*) a series of massive protests throughout Japan against the revision of the United States-Japan Security Treaty (1952) that allowed the US to maintain military bases on Japanese soil, a Japanese scholar of Chinese literature Takeuchi Yoshimi gave a pair of lectures titled “Asia as Method.” Takeuchi had at least three goals to achieve in his lectures. First, he tried to reassess Japanese imperialism which led to an aggressive invasion of its neighboring countries. Second, he desired to overcome Asian intellectuals’ complex toward their “superior” counterparts in Europe and the United States. Third, he critiqued Western ideals of freedom and equality that had been considered to be the universal values by providing a different perspective (Takeuchi 2005, 165). Gladys Pak Lei Chong, Yiu Fai Chow, and Jeroen de Kloet criticize Takeuchi’s “Asia as method” saying that it is “premised on a rather Asia-centric” idea. Instead, they propose “Trans-Asia as method,” to “envision and actualize Asia as a *dialogic communicative* space in which people across borders collaborate to connect diverse voices, concerns, and problems in various, unevenly intersecting public sites in which the national is still a major site but does not exclusively take over public interests” (Italics mine. Chong, Chow, and Kloet 2020, 2-4). If Takeuchi meant to propose an alternative “ideal” that would replace the Western universal values, then, his method could be called “Asia-centric,” but as long as he intended to critique the unconscious Eurocentrism in the universalism and embrace the West by offering a different perspective to reassess the history of imperialism, colonialism, and the Cold War, then, it should not be called that way. I should say Takeuchi’s proposal was already “trans” Asian. Then, why do we need this prefix “trans”?

But a more concerning issue that I am becoming aware of is a sense of exclusivism in the name of diversity. Of course, equity, diversity, and inclusion must be valued as the top priority in education. No doubt about that. Individual personalities must be protected. It is a basic human right. But are we becoming too defensive sometimes to avoid being offensive in any way possible? Is it becoming difficult to critique others’ thoughts and arguments while there is a clear difference between critiquing and criticizing? Toubia Ghadessi writes, “Universities were created as a microcosm of the world, a world where knowledge was not to be worshipped as an untouchable and lifeless object, but was meant to ignite debates and fuel passionate exchanges” (Ghadessi 2018, n.p.). I can rephrase. An individual is not to be worshipped as an untouchable and lifeless object but was meant to ignite debate and fuel passionate exchanges.

In the meantime, I have been noticing a certain tendency in our students' research and writing interests: to be personal. They speak of their preferences. They talk about themselves. Regarding our graduate students' research, they are more interested in spectatorship than the production of cinema; memory studies than historical discourse analysis; and identity politics than political economy. There is no problem in itself, but I still want to ask them: Why are you interested in what they like? Why is it important to you? What can other people learn from it? What is your contribution to the fields? If they do not think about these questions, they are cloistering themselves. It may be comfortable to be shielded from the outside world or stay in an octopus pot (*tako-tsubo*) in a Japanese idiom. I am telling this to myself as well because, as a cinephile, I feel most comfortable being alone, anonymous, and silent in the darkness of a movie theater and being absorbed in gazing at the play of lights and shadows.

Facing forward to the future of "Japanese" "cinema" studies, let me draw your attention to the pedagogical projects that a number of our colleagues have been undertaking by innovatively utilizing SNS. One such example is the work of Colleen Laird, a promising colleague of ours in the field. She has uploaded YouTube videos: "Japanese Cinema" and "The Japanese Women Directors Project." With the former, in which she has created a series of videos with such themes as "Mise-en-scène," "Cinematography," and "Editing," to formulate dialogues between film studies and Japanese studies. With the latter, she not only sheds light on the significant but neglected aspect of film history but also attempts to critique the negligence. Yes, the latter might be considered by some as an act of forming a squad of identity politics. But Laird's critical stance towards such a movement is also clear in her sometimes daring questions thrown to other scholars and filmmakers.

Whenever we respect a self, another individual emerges as its inevitable result. Whenever there are a self and other, there is a conflict because they are different. Considering not only the recent trend in Japanese film studies but also the current condition of humanities, I wonder if we are willing to face the conflict? Being cloistered, whether as a person or as a squad, we are turning a blind eye to the conflict. If that is the case, the conflict will never go away. This is the sense of exclusivism that I am talking about. I am not suggesting that a quarrel is necessary to face the conflict. We all don't want to be hurt. Yet, Plato emphasized in Socratic Dialogue the importance of asking questions as an educative method. Mikhail Bakhtin stressed that dialogue would recognize multiple perspectives and voices. Each person has their final word, but it should relate to and interact with those of other people. A dialogical work engages with and is informed by other works and voices, and seeks to alter or inform it (Robinson 2011, n.p.). Along with Bakhtin, I want to criticize the view that disagreement means at least one of



the people must be wrong. I want to stress that we need to face conflicts because many standpoints exist. To that end, dialogue is indispensable among many incommensurable voices.

## References

- Bordwell, David. 2022. "Streaming Media: All You Can Eat, Until It Eats You." *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, May 22. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2022/05/22/streaming-media-all-you-can-eat-until-it-eats-you/>. Accessed June 12, 2022.
- Chong, Gladys Pak Lei, Yiu Fai Chow, and Jeroen de Kloet. 2020. "Introduction: Toward Trans-Asia: Objects, Possibilities, Paradoxes." In *Trans-Asia as Method: Theory and Practices*, edited by Jeroen de Kloet, Yiu Fai Chow, and Gladys Pak Lei Chong, 1-24. London: Rowan & Littlefield.
- Gerow, Aaron. 2018. "Ozu to Asia Via Hasumi." In *Reorienting Ozu: A Master and His Influence*, edited by Jinhee Choi, 45-58. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ghadessi, Toubia. 2018. "Why We Must Rethink the Dialogue on the Humanities." *New England Board of Higher Education*, October 9. <https://nebhe.org/journal/why-we-must-rethink-the-dialogue-on-the-humanities/>. Accessed June 12, 2022.
- Laird, Colleen A. 2010. "Japanese Cinema, the classroom, and *Swallowtail Butterfly*." *Jump Cut* 52. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/lairdswallowtail/index.html>. Accessed June 12, 2022.
- Nornes, Markus. 2022. "Review: *The Japanese Cinema Book*, edited by Hideaki Fujiki and Alastair Phillips; *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Cinema*, edited by Joanne Bernardi and Shota T. Ogawa; *A Companion to Japanese Cinema*, edited by David Desser." *Film Quarterly* 75 (3): 89-92. <https://online.ucpress.edu/fq/article/75/3/89/120192/Review-The-Japanese-Cinema-Book-edited-by-Hideaki>. Accessed June 12, 2022.
- Robinson, Andrew Robinson. 2011. "In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia." *Ceasefire*, July 29. <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/>. Accessed June 12, 2022.
- Takeuchi, Yoshimi. 2005. "Asia as Method." In *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, edited and translated by Richard F. Calichman, 149-65. New York: Columbia University Press.