

## **“Un-cinematic” and Clean: Japanese Film as Viewed by the 1920s Soviet Press**

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**Abstract.** Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein, formulated some of his most influential ideas in filmmaking through his study of traditional Japanese arts. His lifelong fascination with Japanese culture and its alleged disposition for montage generated a number of in-depth, thought-provoking investigations, aimed at elucidating the theoretical underpinnings of Eisenstein’s work. This paper focuses, instead, on the historical and diplomatic circumstances surrounding Soviet intellectuals’ understanding of Japanese cinema.

Eisenstein’s *Za kadrom* (“Beyond the Shot”) was written as an afterword to Naum Kaufman’s *Japanese Cinema* (1929), published as a brochure for the first “Japanese Film Exhibit” held in Moscow and Leningrad in the summer of 1929. The exhibit was a symbolic continuation of the collaborative efforts by VOKS (the All-Union Society for the Cultural Ties with Abroad) and the Shochiku film studio to organize the famous Kabuki visit in the summer of 1928. Both the Kabuki tour and the theatrical release of Japanese films were acts of cultural diplomacy, albeit with different political undertones. While the media coverage of the Kabuki visit was chiefly directed abroad, the writings on the “Japanese Film Exhibit” were targeted inwards, at the domestic Soviet audience, creating notably different veins within the official coverage of Japanese film and theater in the 1920s Soviet press.

The study of 1920s Soviet media and archival materials documenting the organization of the first Japanese film screenings in Moscow and Leningrad

revealed a particular set of linguistic and rhetorical strategies deliberately adopted by Soviet intellectuals in order to present Japanese cinema as an ideologically non-threatening, exotic object of fascination. Soviet writers also worked to present Japanese film as a powerful model for resisting the West, one that may be instrumental in achieving the political and economic objectives set by the Soviet film industry. In their assessment of Japanese films, their production and distribution practices, Soviet intellectuals often wrote of the concept of “cleanliness,” which testified to the cultural and ideological difficulties they experienced in formulating a more nuanced, historically contextualized vision of “Japanese cinema.”

**Keywords:** Japanese film, Soviet cultural diplomacy, reception studies, film export, Soviet-Japanese cultural exchange, Kabuki theater.

At the dawn of the Cold War, viewers on both sides of the Iron Curtain experienced their “first encounter” with Japanese cinema, yet they were watching very different kinds of films. For example, while it was a hit in Western Europe and the US, Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* (1950) was not theatrically released in the Soviet Union until 1966. Instead, in the early 1950s, priority was given to films that openly supported the leftist cause, such as Imai Tadashi’s *And Yet We Live* (1951), Kamei Fumio’s *Woman Walking Alone on the Earth* (1953), and Yamamoto Satsuo’s *The Street Without Sun* (1954) [Fedorova 2018, pp. 216–249]. Thus, Japanese filmmakers’ rise to fame was a worldwide yet hardly homogenous phenomenon. Each geographical locale had its own *vision* of Japanese cinema, firmly rooted in the region’s unique history, culture, and ideological background. This paper addresses the particular notion of “Japanese cinema” as channeled through the Soviet media in the 1920s. By critically examining the discourse surrounding Japan and its filmmaking in the Soviet press at this time, it aims to identify a set of meanings and political functions assigned to “Japanese cinema” within the larger context of Soviet cultural diplomacy.

One of the earliest attempts to introduce Soviet audiences to Japanese film occurred soon after the end of the Civil War, with the establishment of the Soviet Union as an independent state structure in December 1922. In July 1923, a weekly art journal published in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) – *Zhizn' iskusstva (Life of Art)* – issued a short article entitled *Kino v Yaponii* (“Film in Japan”). However, the article includes hyperbole and inaccuracies, indicating that the author (whose identity is unknown) had no professional training in Japanese art history. For example, the article exaggerates the use of special “masks” by Japanese actors, which convey “typified emotions” such as “shame, fear, dismay, love, grief, happiness, and so on.” While early Japanese cinema did inherit many elements from traditional stage practices – including the use of female impersonators (*onnagata*) from the Kabuki theater – the use of masks was chiefly associated with Noh performances.

Despite this mistake, the article was correct in identifying a strong desire on behalf of the Japanese film industry to export their productions to foreign audiences in the early 1920s. This goal was considered worthwhile but extremely difficult to achieve due to the “peculiar nature” of Japanese films which were “based predominantly on local myths and folklore” and portrayed as reflecting a lifestyle and a set of mores “totally alien to Europeans” [*Kino v Yaponii* 1923, p. 26].

Special credit was given to Edward Tanaka (Tanaka Kaneyuki, n/a – 1937) and his attempts to modernize the Japanese film industry. Tanaka was characterized as an “energetic film producer” who strove to create films that were truthful to “the psychology of Japanese everyday life and customary practices,” yet were easily comprehensible to the Western public in terms of style and acting technique. A British novel by Maria Fairfax titled *April* was cited as the basis for Tanaka’s first experiment in this kind of filmmaking. Before his return to Japan in 1920, Edward Tanaka worked in Hollywood [Miyao 2013, p. 16]. Alongside Henry Kotani and Thomas Kurihara, he made invaluable contributions to the development of the newly founded Shochiku Kinema, yet he was by no means “the leader” of this studio. There were other important figures, including Murata Minoru and Osanai Kaoru, and the decision by Soviet journalists

to focus exclusively on Tanaka seems rather arbitrary. While information about Japan was scarce and often inaccurate, even at this early stage one notices a link between the discourse about Japanese cinema and the dissemination of Russian/Soviet films abroad. For example, right next to the anonymous *Kino v Yaponii* there is an article about the reception of prerevolutionary Russian films and post-revolutionary émigré cinema – Alexander Volkov’s *Kean* (1924) is mentioned – in France and Britain. The European “fascination with Russian actors” eerily echoes the discourse of the uniqueness of the “Japanese acting technique” prevalent in 1920s Soviet and European film criticism.

In January 1925, Japan officially recognized the Soviet Union. The signing of the Basic Convention coincided with the establishment of VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Abroad), which played a decisive role in promoting Soviet culture abroad as well as in shaping public opinion within the Soviet state regarding cultural diplomacy [Lozhkina 2011; David-Fox 2012]. In 1928, VOKS collaborated with the Shochiku film studio to invite the famous Kabuki theater to Moscow and Leningrad. Then, in 1929, joining forces with Shochiku again, VOKS opened the first “Japanese Film Exhibit” in Moscow. Kinugasa Teinosuke’s costume drama *Kyōraku hichō* (“Hrabrets iz Kioto”, “The Brave Man from Kyoto”, 1928) and a short documentary film entitled *Shimaguni* (“Strana Ostrovov”, “Island Country”) were shown in Moscow, while in Leningrad, Ushihara Kiyohiko’s comedy *Kindai musha shugyō* (“Vospitanie molodogo samuraya”, “Modern Training of a Samurai”, 1928) was screened. The screenings were accompanied by the publication of Naum Kaufman’s *Yaponskoe kino* (“Japanese Cinema” 1929), one of the first monographs on Japanese filmmaking written outside of Japan. The book is mostly remembered for its afterword, written by Sergei Eisenstein (“Beyond the Shot”, “Za kadrom”), in which he famously concludes that, unlike the Kabuki theater, *haiku* poetry, *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, and other “traditional” forms of art, Japanese cinema disregards montage, and therefore remains utterly “uncinematic” [Eisenstein 1929, pp. 72–92]. While certainly an expression of the Soviet filmmaker’s brilliant mind, these comments no doubt also

embody cultural prejudices: the number of Japanese films Eisenstein had seen prior to writing his text is open to debate. As such, his claims for the “un-cinematic” nature of Japanese cinema must be interpreted as part of larger diplomatic and representational strategies adopted by the Soviet press at this time.

Soviet intellectuals played a crucial role in establishing the “blueprint” for critically engaging with Japanese cinema, especially those who had visited or lived in Japan. Latvian-Belorussian singer Irma Jaunzem (1887–1975), praised for her performances of folk songs, toured Japan in 1926 and later published an article entitled *Theaters and Cinema in Japan (Based on Personal Impressions)*. As indicated in the title, emphasis was placed on the “personal” nature of her first-hand experience [Jaunzem 1926, pp. 8–9]. In December 1927, when scholars of Japanese literature Nikolai Konrad (1891–1970) and Andrei Leifert (1898–1937) spoke at the State Institute for Art History in Leningrad, their talk on Japanese cinema was praised for its “documentary value”, a trait attributed to Konrad and Leifert’s experience of “living in Japan for extended periods of time” and their ability to engage with Japanese cinema on a more “personal” level [S. M. 1928, p. 19]. Andrei Leifert visited Japan in 1925–1927 as a member of the Soviet Trade Mission, while Nikolai Konrad – one of the “founding fathers” of Japanese Studies in Russia – studied at Tokyo University in 1914–1917. Other Soviet “returnees” who wrote on Japanese cinema included David Arkin (1899–1957), a Soviet art critic and historian who visited Japan as part of the preparations held for the New Russian Art Exhibit (*Shin Roshia ten*) organized by VOKS in 1927. Venedikt Mart (Venedikt Matveev, 1896–1937), a poet and a writer known for his literary translations of Chinese and Japanese poetry [Suleimenova 2007], also visited. A similar tactic was adopted by the Soviet media in its coverage of the Kabuki theater: priority was given to writers known to have previously visited Japan [Ueda 2017, p. 48].

While living in Japan, Soviet intellectuals had unprecedented access to Japanese films. This unique, privileged, and direct experience of Japanese cinema made their texts stand out as particularly valid and *reliable*. However, the observations made by these Soviet intellectuals

were in fact rarely “personal” – even so, being described as such allowed for a greater aura of persuasiveness. The abundance of statistical data provided by the Soviet intellectuals also contributed to this reception. For example, in her “personal” account, Irma Jaunzem includes statistics on the number of Japanese film theaters, the ratio of Japanese and foreign films being screened there, the length of standard film programs, and their ticket prices. She also reported the monthly salary of the *benshi* (film narrators who aided silent film screenings with their live performances) who were earning up to a thousand rubles per month. Konrad and Leifert also provided data, reporting that, in 1927, there were nearly 9,000 *benshi* working in Japan, over a thousand stationary film theaters, and more than 50 million filmgoers per month.

Venedikt Mart’s account is less data driven, perhaps because he was a poet. Still, in his own highly expressive way, he emphasizes the ubiquity and the popularity of cinema in the 1920s Japan. His text opens with the following remark: “Japan has thousands and thousands of film theaters... In the evenings, even the most remote corners of Japan’s distant islands, Ezo and Kyushu, are illuminated by the welcoming lights of cinema” [Mart 1927, p. 16]. Within a span of only three months, an article remarkably similar to Mart’s appeared in the same journal attributed to “N. Osheff”. Its first line reads, “Japan has thousands of film theaters.” This could, of course, simply indicate the lack of vigilance and professionalism on the part of Soviet editors in catching repetition or even plagiarism. At the same time, it could also illustrate efforts to emphasize this “numeric” aspect of Japanese film culture. In the writings of Soviet intellectuals, we are often confronted with almost identical “readings” of Japanese cinema, articulated through remarkably similar linguistic patterns.

While the number of film theaters and film studios operating in Japan constituted one of the central topics continually addressed by the Soviet media, far less attention was paid to the actual films produced in Japan themselves. In his *Japanese Cinema*, Soviet film critic Naum Kaufman writes of the cultural differences between the Asakusa and the Ginza film districts, ruminates over the melodic “sounds of the Japanese street”,

and introduces the names of major film studios and their film stars. Kaufman never visited Japan, but this did not deter him from writing about the Japanese film industry in a highly detailed, authoritative manner. However, he does not address more artistic concerns such as the role of a film director, editing techniques, or *mise-en-scène*. Even more curious, in the preface to his book, Kaufman acknowledges the help of Elena Ternovskaia (1901–1938), who worked for the Soviet embassy in Tokyo. In 1928, Ternovskaia accompanied the members of the Kabuki theater to Moscow and Leningrad as their interpreter. In Tokyo, she was often entrusted with work related to the release and distribution of Soviet films [Fedorova 2018, p. 31], which made her highly knowledgeable about Japanese stage art and filmmaking. If Kaufman and Ternovskaia were authorized to enlighten the Soviet readers about the stylistic features of Japanese films, they could have easily done so. The fact that they did not suggests they were instructed otherwise.

Texts written by Soviet intellectuals who, unlike Kaufman, had lived in Japan, followed a similar pattern: instead of addressing the Japanese films themselves, they chose to focus on the mechanisms of film production, distribution, and promotion. Such a technical approach was often justified by the implied artistic inadequacy of Japanese films, considered not as culturally accomplished or relevant as Soviet or other cinemas. “For Europeans, Japanese films can only be of interest for their external, decorative elements... there is nothing the West can learn from them, yet looking at this profoundly national form of art is extremely exciting” wrote Irma Jaunzem. “Japanese movie hall in itself, for a European, is a picturesque and colorful spectacle. A vibrating sea of filmgoers in bright, magnificent clothing, an infinite rustle and waves of paper and silk fans, the talk, the laughter, the jokes,” Venedikt Mart continued in a similar vein. Japanese *people* – and not their films – were seen as the true point of attraction. It was presumably for a similar reason that, on those rare occasions when Soviet critics wrote about Japanese film texts (and not the “unique” cultural environment surrounding them), their attention was almost entirely absorbed by the Japanese actors. This tendency to marvel at their “unique” facial

expressions, body movements, and acting techniques was also prevalent among European film critics [Iwamoto 2015, p. 21].

Soviet authors were fascinated by the Japanese movie theater as a space with specific rules, customs, and behaviors. Customs such as the need to take off your shoes during the screenings; the presence of *benshi* performers and food vendors; the gender segregated seating system; and the abundance of colorful advertisements were seen as exotic and defining features of the Japanese cinematic experience. During the “Japanese Film Exhibit” organized by VOKS in 1929, great effort was put into recreating the atmosphere of a Japanese film theater. Exhibition venues in Moscow and Leningrad were decorated with “Japan-inspired” paper lanterns, panels, and curtains – even the golden folding screens left by the Kabuki theater were utilized. At the venues, young Soviet filmmakers who had previously visited Japan were hired as “special tour guides” to share their first-hand experience with the visitors. In addition to the film screenings, numerous pictures, posters, film books, and journals were exhibited. On display, there were also makeup tools used by film actors, the staff uniforms of the Shochiku film theaters, and everyday use items such as chopsticks, handkerchiefs, and wooden clogs (*geta*) [Fedorova 2018, pp. 210–211]. In this way, an enticing vision of “Japanese cinema” was created for Soviet visitors to consume.

The concept of “justified exoticism” used by Savelli and Kitamura in their study of the Kabuki visit thus comes to mind when considering the “Japanese Film Exhibit.” For Soviet authorities, the benefits of receiving the Japanese theater were largely diplomatic. The costly endeavor of inviting Kabuki was worthwhile because of the powerful publicity it would generate. In order to benefit from the tour in this way, the Soviet authorities were willing to *justify* Kabuki, which could easily have been interpreted as a “feudal” and “reactionary” art form, ideologically incompatible with the Marxist cause. The political implications of hosting the tour were directed *outwards*, and so was the media coverage of this cross-cultural event. [Kitamura & Savelli 2017].

In contrast to the Kabuki tour, the “Japanese Film Exhibit” was organized for *domestic* propaganda purposes. Unlike the media



coverage of the Kabuki performances, the writings on Japanese cinema were targeted *inwards*, and so was the language adopted by the Soviet press. The screenings of Japanese film did not require the visit of an entire troupe and thus were relatively affordable. They also held lesser diplomatic value and complexity largely for the simple fact that films were not people and thus could not “report back” to Japan. Thus, unlike Kabuki, the screening of Japanese films could function simultaneously as a symbol of diplomatic partnership with Japan while allowing for a critique of those aspects of Japan’s political system, societal structure, and diplomacy which were considered “alien” to the Soviet state. This binary effect was achieved through a symbolic division of labor within the cognitive framework of “Japanese cinema.” The vibrant culture surrounding the production and distribution of Japanese films was seen as a continuation of positive trends, already *justified* for Soviet audiences during the Kabuki visit. The actual films produced in Japan, however, served as an illustration of undesirable traits of Japanese society and were often harshly criticized for their “feudalism” and “petit bourgeoisie” mentality.

In his overview of the “Japanese Film Exhibit,” critic Daniil Rafalovich writes extensively on the film posters, photographs, film journals, and other printed materials demonstrated at the fair. Only at the end of his article – and somewhat reluctantly – does the author turn to Kinugasa Teinosuke’s *Brave Man from Kyoto*, which he describes as the exhibit’s “central showpiece”, that leaves nonetheless “a strange and contradictory impression.” The story, which revolves around tropes of tragic love and revenge, is labeled by Rafalovich as “naïve to the point of being laughable.” He goes on to write that the film action is rendered “slow and tiresome,” and that only the acting of Hayashi Chujiro should be celebrated for its virtuosity and plasticity that leave the talents of Douglas Fairbanks “far behind” [Rafalovich 1929, p. 8]. Boris Mazing echoes this perspective on the film, calling *Brave Man from Kyoto* an “actor’s film.” He writes that Hayashi Chujiro’s “incredible dynamism, plasticity, expressiveness of motions, the speediness of his animal grip, and his unparalleled fencing skills” make him an actor “truly deserving of a film entirely made

for him.” Yet, as a cinematic endeavor, Mazing concludes that *Brave Man from Kyoto* “has nothing new to offer” – its cinematography and editing are considered weak, its narrative is rendered “primitive” [Mazing 1929, p. 11]. Mikhail Bleiman attended the screenings in Leningrad and saw both Kinugasa’s costume drama and Ushihara Kiyohiko’s *Modern Training of a Samurai*. Ushihara’s romantic comedy is set at a lumber mill in the mountainous region of Nagano, where the local woodcutters are fascinated with a beautiful girl named Fujiko (played by Tanaka Kinuyo), known for her delicious home-made biscuits. (In the Soviet press, the film often appeared under the title *Fujiko’s Cookies* [“Pechen’e Fudziko” in Russian, “Fudzikini pundiki” in Ukrainian]). Both films were described by Bleiman as irrevocably “bad” (*plokhie kartiny*). Bleiman was especially angered by the films’ technical deficiencies and their meager attempts at imitating Hollywood. According to Bleiman, the narrative patterns of Ushihara’s comedy, clearly borrowed from American cinema, evolved so “clumsily” and at such a “sickeningly slow pace” that they ended up becoming utterly “meaningless.” The actors were considered the only redeeming quality of both films, whose mastery stemmed from the traditions of Kabuki theater.

Both Shochiku films are considered lost today and it is virtually impossible to either reaffirm or to rebuke the critics’ statements. It is worth mentioning, however, that, in 1928, Kinugasa Teinosuke was in Moscow, where he interacted with Soviet intellectuals, including Sergei Eisenstein. It is plausible that Kinugasa even introduced the Soviet filmmakers to his new work, *Crossroads* (1928), which was later distributed in Paris and Berlin [Nakayama, 2012]. The Soviet audiences, however, were instead presented with a less “experimental” *jidaigeki*. In fact, Kinugasa’s *Brave Man from Kyoto* was the only Japanese feature film viewed by audiences in Moscow. The decision to also release *Modern Training of a Samurai* in Leningrad and other parts of the Soviet Union was made only after the Embassy of Japan intervened, expressing discontent about the sudden exclusion of Ushihara’s modern film (*gendaiigeki*) from the screenings [Fedorova, 2018, pp. 208–210]. Programming decisions made by VOKS indicate that whenever possible, Soviet authorities opted for the

“archaic”, choosing films that were less *threatening*, both in terms of style and ideological content.

Films selected for the Japanese Film Exhibit thus allowed the Soviet media to denounce Japan for its strict social hierarchy, cultural backwardness, technical imperfections, and lack of creativity. The Japanese film industry, on the other hand, was celebrated for its ability to resist the West on both the cultural (*benshi* performers, unique theater design, film advertisement, etc.) and economic level. Soviet critics emphasized Japan’s “successful” competition with Hollywood, stressing that Japanese studios produced *more* films, and it was these domestic productions that occupied nearly eighty percent of the Japanese film market. The accomplishment of the Japanese of “almost completely expelling the foreign film production, and successfully catering to the needs of a large, domestic audience” was proclaimed by Olga Kameneva, the head of VOKS, as demanding particular attention from the Soviet Film Industry [Beliavskiy 1929, p. 1]. Japanese film production and distribution practices were seen as possible models for Soviet imitation. Members of mobile projection units, traveling across the USSR, were often instructed to learn from the experience of Japanese *benshi* performers [Pozner 2005, p. 337].

By focusing on the material culture surrounding cinema rather than the actual films, Soviet media was able to emphasize Japan’s cultural “uniqueness” as well as Japan’s fascination with Soviet art and Marxist ideology. Reviews of the 1929 Japanese Film Exhibit – written as manuals designed to teach readers how to *correctly* interpret the event – stressed the number of writings in Japanese periodicals dedicated to the issue of Soviet cinema. A “rather fine” caricature painting of a Soviet filmmaker, Vsevolod Pudovkin, which was published in one of the Japanese magazines on view at the exhibit, was considered particularly praiseworthy [Rafalovich 1929, p. 8]. In Naum Kaufman’s book, Japan was described as being “torn – like many other countries – between Americanism and Leninism.” Japanese intellectuals and the working class were seen as “leaning towards Soviet Russia,” while the Japanese art world was considered to be “under the great influence of Soviet culture”

[Kaufman 1929, p. 55]. These statements lacked “cinematic evidence” – presumably on purpose. In 1929, Japan’s Proletarian Film League was established, and one of its members, Okada Sozo (Yamanouchi Hikaru, 1903–1983), even visited Moscow [Kawasaki & Harada 2002, p. 153]. The demonstration of Okada’s film, however, received little attention from the press. Arguing for the leftist tendencies in 1920s Japan seemed more effective through letters; films were used instead for re-creating the “pre-modern” for Soviet audiences to marvel at, and for Soviet media to critique.

The vision of “Japanese cinema” presented by the Soviet press reveals much about the cultural diplomacy towards Japan, as well as the general attitudes toward film art held by Soviet intellectuals. Needless to say, these were often in radical opposition to the social and cultural status of film in the 1920s Japan. One thought-provoking example is provided by Irma Jaunzem, who opens her account with a reference to the “cleanliness” generally associated with Japan (*iaponskaia chistoplotnost’*). Because film screenings and stage performances lasted longer in Japan than in Europe, she reasons, most spectators felt it necessary “to prepare themselves for the long hours of work” (*rabota*) by taking a proper bath beforehand. The bathhouses were often located within a theater, which offered a special ticket fare that included both a visit to the bathhouse and the stage show. This kind of practice may have very well existed back in 1926, yet it is taken out of context by Jaunzem, who sees in it the spectators’ desire to be clean for the show and as such, an expression of respect for the “high art” of theater.

In reality, the link between stage art and bathing may have been a lot more mundane. Public bathhouses had existed in Japan since the Edo period (1603–1868) and were strongly associated not only with the principles of hygiene, but perhaps even more so with the notions of pleasure and entertainment. The shogunate’s attempts to ban mixed-sex bathing were not always successful and a large number of women hired as *yuna* (female bathing attendants) were known to engage in prostitution [Nakano 1970, pp. 86–111] (still, it would be a mistake to assume that the public bathhouses in Japan existed only for sexual purposes.) It must

be noted, then, that attending a theatrical show (a form of intellectual stimulation) and soaking in a bathtub or visiting a pleasure quarter (forms of physical entertainment) were not necessarily considered as activities standing in radical opposition to each other. The hierarchies of entertainment known to Soviet intellectuals were not universally standardized.

After the Kanto earthquake (1923), an architectural style known as *miya-gata* or *miya-zukuri* (which can be translated as the “palace style”) became commonly used in the public bathhouses of the Tokyo area. The lavish design was meant to elevate the spirits of Tokyoites who were devastated by the natural disaster [Machida 2016, pp. 130–137]. Some sources indicate that the public bathhouse with a symbolic naming of “Kabuki-yu” (located in the Mukojima-ward) became the first to adopt *miya-zukuri*. Known for its use of undulating bargeboards (*kara-hafu*), this architectural style, commonly seen in Shinto shrines and other religious sanctuaries, was gradually reinterpreted as a broader sign of “otherworldliness.” The traces of *miya-zukuri* can be found in the architectural design of theater buildings (including the famous Kabuki-za), as well as old bathhouses, brothels (*yukaku*), and even funeral cars (*miyagata reikyusha*) that aid people in their final, irreversible departure into the lands of paradise (*gokuraku jōdo*).

In 1917, sex-segregated seating was introduced to Japanese film theaters, further amplifying the link between cinema and other forms of public entertainment deemed by the government as low-class and in need of further legislation. This link, however, was overlooked by the Soviet press. Irma Jaunzem, for example, mentions the ban on the depiction of “kissing” in Japanese cinema, yet fails to recognize in it the government’s attempt to execute stronger control over the film industry. Unwillingness to put physical intimacy on display is interpreted as yet another manifestation of “Japaneseness”, associated with the notions of chastity and emotional restraint. In the eyes of Soviet intellectuals, not only was Japanese film theater “exquisitely clean” but so was the mind of the Japanese spectator and the content of the films he/she watched. The Soviet press emphasized the “stylistically clean” and ideologically

sterile nature of Japanese films. Mikhail Bleiman complained that both Kinugasa's *Brave Man from Kyoto* and Ushihara's *Modern Training of a Samurai* made it impossible to clarify "how and what exactly Japanese cinema advocates for" [Bleiman 1929, p. 14]. Cameraman Yuri Stilianudis, who had a chance to watch Kinugasa's *Crossroads* in Berlin – and seems to have been genuinely impressed with its stylistic achievements – wrote of his utter bewilderment with the "exceedingly trivial" narrative they served [Stilianudis 1929, p. 3]. The complaints about the lack of "ideology" in films that were actually *seen* by the Soviet intellectuals coincided with an abundance of more general statements regarding the "feudal", "capitalist", and "jingoistic" aspects of Japanese film content. When faced with the task of analyzing the actual films, however, the Soviet critics could not detect these ideological features. Their understanding of Japanese history and artistic tradition was too elementary to comprehend the subtle ideological workings of Japanese film texts.

Whenever confronted with a cultural specificity that could not be adequately explained, the notion of "cleanliness" was invoked. However, the consistent commentary on the lack of ideological meaningfulness, stylistic innovation, and narrative complexity can be viewed first and foremost as an indicator of the inability of Soviet intellectuals to distinguish these traits. The "exotic" atmosphere of the Japanese film theater and the "unique" dress of filmgoers and film actors were the most "visible" signs of Japaneseness; as such, they were readily noticed and discussed, thereby contributing to an image of a national cinema that was well-managed and well-advertised, but ideologically shallow and profoundly "un-cinematic."

This notion of external excellence, which overshadowed the lack of meaningful "content", was central to the Soviet intellectuals' understanding of Japanese cinema. There were, however, attempts to overcome this approach. Mikhail Bleiman, who was extremely critical of the Japanese films demonstrated during the exhibit, wrote just as irritably of a dominant tendency among the Soviet intellectuals "to marvel at exoticism." The "pursuit of rarity and uniqueness," also defined

as “gourmandism” (*gurmanstvo*), led to “unconditional acceptance” of everything exotic in art, a trend Bleiman considered detrimental to film criticism. In a similar vein, Boris Mazing argued for the necessity of expanding the selection of films demonstrated at the exhibit, stressing the importance of looking at depictions of a more “contemporary” Japan.

One of the first attempts to look at Japanese films from a more “cinematic” perspective was introduced in the Soviet Union via Germany. Although disappointed with the narrative simplicity of Kinugasa’s *Crossroads* (released in Berlin as *Im Schatten des Yoshiwara* (“Shadows of Yoshiwara”)) Yuri Stilianudis, in his *Letter From Berlin* published in a Soviet newspaper *Kino*, dedicated considerable attention to the film’s artistic qualities. Being a cinematographer himself, Stilianudis was particularly impressed by the film’s use of tracking shots and montage. Unlike his contemporaries in Moscow and Leningrad, Stilianudis often described the most impressive and memorable scenes in detail. He was particularly fascinated by the absence of long shots in the scene depicting the *matsuri* celebration and the peculiar use of lighting in scenes depicting the characters’ descent from the stairs. His overall conclusion was that Kinugasa’s film is a masterpiece, “a wonderful work of film art, which can make any German and American director envious.”

Stilianudis’ review is not entirely devoid of exoticism; in *Crossroads* he sees considerable influence from Kabuki and other “traditional” forms of Japanese art. Still, the tone of his writing feels different from that of his contemporaries. This may be attributed to his professional training as a filmmaker as well as his experience of watching Japanese cinema abroad as a Soviet national. In his text, Stilianudis mentions the “pleasure” he experienced while watching *Crossroads*, especially in comparison to other films being shown in Berlin around the same time, which he characterized as “hollow” and “bleak.” Among these were Hanns Schwarz’ *The Wonderful Lies of Nina Petrovna* (1929), Fred Niblo’s *The Mysterious Lady* (1928) with Greta Garbo, and Ernst Lubitch’s *The Patriot* (1929) with Emil Jannings. He describes the “overwhelming majority” of these films as exploiting “Russian topics.” No detailed analysis of these films is provided, yet Stilianudis asserts that, after watching them, it was

“particularly pleasing” to discover Kinugasa’s work. Thus, it appears that Japanese films could become an object of admiration if one could simultaneously downplay the achievements of other national cinemas, especially if they seemed to capitalize on the cultural appropriation of “Russianness.”

The Soviet press was disturbed by this cinematic rivalry with European and American film studios, many of which were amply staffed with Russian émigré filmmakers. References to Japan in Soviet film journals were often dictated by this concern. In July 1929, shortly after the Japanese Film Exhibit was held, the Leningrad issue of *Kino* reported on the release of Kinugasa’s *Crossroads* in Berlin and simultaneously complained that “due to the weakness of cultural ties with Japan, an interest shown by the Japanese intellectuals towards Soviet art is exploited by foreign film studios. German UFA’s *Taras Bulba* (based on Gogol) and *The Love of Jeanne Ney* (based on Erenburg) have been recently brought to Japan and received considerable success in Tokyo” [Bek 1929, p. 3]. News about Japan published in Soviet periodicals almost always revealed sources related to Russia, even when the connections were not obvious. On February 12, 1929, *Kino* announced the grand re-opening of “Musashino-kan”, one of the biggest “Western-style” film theaters in Tokyo. Other Japanese theaters “make people squat” but Musashino-kan has chairs, the newspaper declared, in a somewhat ironic fashion. The first film screened at the new theater was Frank Borzage’s *Street Angel* (1928). It seems odd that this particular news caught the magazine’s attention. Yet, if we turn to the Japanese brochure issued by the Musashino-kan, it becomes clear that the music accompanying Borzage’s film at the theater’s grand opening was performed by a certain Andrei Petrov – presumably, an émigré.

Writing about the Japanese film industry in the 1920s Soviet Union was an exceedingly political act. “Japanese cinema” functioned as yet another platform for promulgating policies officially implemented by the Soviet state. The Japanese film industry had little input in this process. An attempt to challenge this dynamic would occur in 1930, when Japanese film journalist Fukuro Ippei visited the Soviet Union to give a series of



public lectures to accompany the screenings of Suzuki Shigeyoshi's leftist *Nani ga kanojo o sō saseta ka* ("Chto ee takoi sdelalo?", "What Made Her Do This?", 1930). Fukuro's experience in the Soviet Union and the nature of his partnership with VOKS, as well as the reception of Suzuki's tendency film (*keikō eiga*) – strikingly different from the Shochiku films of the first "Japanese Film Exhibit" both stylistically and ideologically – constitute a topic worthy of a separate consideration.

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