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Dissertation Prospectus

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Realism and Japanese Cinema

This dissertation will examine how realism played a significant role in creating the dominant mode of filmmaking and criticism in Japan from the 1930s to the late 1950s. From its inception, cinema has been considered realistic due to its photographic nature. Yet, as André Bazin pointed out, it was new sound technology added to cinema in the late 1920s and new social concerns appearing worldwide in the 1930s that gave rise to realism as a new form of filmmaking based on the cinema's rediscovery of reality as its subject matter.¹ This was also the case in Japan. Bolstered by the growing popularity of newsreels reporting the battles in China, the term "realism" became by the mid-1930s the most debated topic in the Japanese film world, as a film critic to declare in 1936: "Realist films [*rearizumu eiga*] clearly indicates the way our contemporary film art should follow."² The momentum behind realism slowed down during the years between 1941 and 1945 with the outbreak of the war against the United States. Even in this period, however, the mode of realist filmmaking still remained dominant and was widely used in

¹ I do not mean that there were neither realist filmmakers nor filmmaking in the silent period. Rather, I am following here the hypothesis André Bazin made in his famous essay, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" (1950-55). In it, while admitting the significance of such "anti-montage" directors as Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau, and Robert Flaherty, Bazin clearly pointed out that "the sound image, far less flexible than the visual image, would carry montage in the direction of realism, increasingly eliminating both plastic expressionism and the symbolic relation between images." See his *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 1:23-40.

² Kurushima Yukio, "Eiga to rearizumu: Eiga riron no hatten wo mezashite [Film and Realism: Toward the development of Film Theory]," *Eiga hyōron* 18.7 (July 1936): 48. This special issue of *Eiga hyōron* was devoted entirely to the discussion of "film and realism," collecting articles from fourteen contributors.

a quasi-non-fiction film genre called *bunka eiga* (Culture Film). But the more the war situation deteriorated, the more the militarist government forced filmmakers to make films that could conceal the reality of wartime Japan under the guise of verisimilitude attributed to the realist filmmaking. As a result, the period created an insoluble dilemma for Japanese filmmakers that reality did not allow them to film it plainly unless they stopped looking at it critically. Nevertheless, realism was soon revitalized during the Occupation period (1945-1952) as a practical tool for re-enlightening the Japanese on either democracy or communism. After that realism kept functioning as the dominant mode of filmmaking and criticism in postwar Japan until such younger directors/critics as Masumura Yasuzō, Ōshima Nagisa, and Yoshida Yoshishige began in the late 1950s to criticize it by placing themselves on the side of “modernism.”

Despite hundreds of books written about either realism or Japanese cinema, the combination the two has been largely neglected until now. This is partly because of the limited access to the primary sources, especially ones written in Japanese. But the main reasons for this neglect, I insist, must lie in the conventional discourse that has always attributed realism, or the truthful representation of reality, to the domain of Western art (as in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*), and anti-realism, or the abstraction of reality, to that of non-Western art (as in Roland Barthes’ *Empire of Signs*).³ In the history of film theory, this opposition between realism (the West) and anti-realism (non-West) was reinforced by those who harshly attacked the traditions of realist filmmaking in the West (including both Europe and Hollywood) by drawing on such French post-structuralists as Roland

³ Thoroughly influenced by Auerbach, film historian Roy Armes maintained in 1971 that “The problem of how best to represent reality in art is as old as Western literature... This may be regarded as the great tradition of Western art, unchallenged until the abstractionism of our own century...” See his *Pattern of Realism* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971), 1.

Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan. For instance, in an essay published in 1970, Jean-Louis Baudry emphasized that the visual image the movie camera presents us is still following the Renaissance model of representation system which, by giving us the false impression of occupying the position of the subject, conceals the fact that cinema is “an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology.”⁴ In the meantime, Noël Burch maintained in his famous book on Japanese cinema, *To the Distant Observer*, that the main character of traditional Japanese theatrical forms like *kabuki* was presentational, and it is this tradition that “helped to preserve the Japanese cinema against the ideology of ‘realism’ which rapidly took over the cinema of the West.”⁵ It is obvious that Burch, another post-structuralist in the 1970s, used Japan as an ideal “other” that helped him to reveal the ideological slant of the realism’s relentless claim for the truthful representation of reality. However appropriate it was at the time, in his account of Japanese cinema there was no space where realism and this non-Western national cinema could meet in harmony.

The primary concern of my dissertation is to break with such conventional and persistent Orientalist discourse by exploring the neglected tradition of realist film practice in Japan. Yet in doing so, I must address another difficulty in dealing with realism in the Japanese context. Generally, non-Western countries like Japan are marked by their belated entry into modernity. Because of their belatedness, they become situated in a different cultural and historical context wherein the alleged distinction between realism and modernism becomes ambiguous. For instance, it is often said that Japanese

⁴ Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28.2 (Winter 1974-75), reprinted in Philp Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 295.

⁵ Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, revised and edited by Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 83.

realist/naturalist literature developed under the huge influence of the nineteenth-century realist writers like Emile Zola and Charles Dickens. This imported tradition saw its flowering with the rise of the literary group called the *Shirakabaha* (White Birch School), whose most representative work, Shiga Naoya's "Wakai" (Reconciliation), appeared as late as 1917, only a few years before such younger "modernist" writers as Kawabata Yasunari and Yokomitsu Riichi inaugurated their writing experiments in parallel with the rise of the post WWI European avant-garde literature.⁶ Consequently, this temporal gap made the distinction between realism and modernism in Japan almost compatible in terms of their truth claims. In fact, in one of the manifestos he wrote for his own literary group *shinkakuha* (New Sensation School), Yokomitsu clearly proclaimed: "It must be us [New Sensationists] who deserve to be called 'realist' in its truest meaning."⁷

But it is not sufficient to conceive of the development of realism in Japan as always falling behind its Western counterparts. Indeed, the first theoretical debates on cinematic realism in Japan were mostly made in the years between 1936 and 1941, five to ten years earlier than the advent of André Bazin's ontological theory of realism. Furthermore, the debates dealt in depth with such a variety of topics as epistemological realism, aesthetic realism, and phenomenological realism, as if to prompt us to reconsider our general attitude that always postulates the West's domination over the non-West in the creation of theory (or knowledge). However, emphasizing Japan's precedence over

⁶ For instance, the literary scholar Denis Keen calls Yokomitsu the only Japanese writer who deserves to be called "modernist," for he did create a genuine "literature" or "fictional work of art" that gave birth to a new language in Japan that had not yet been produced before him. See his "Introduction" to his translation of Yokomitsu's experimental writings, *"Love" and Other Stories of Yokomitsu Riichi* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 1974), xi.

⁷ Yokomitsu Riichi, "Shinkaku bungaku no kenkyū [A Study of New Sensationalist Literature]," *Teihon Yokomitsu Riichi Zenshū* [Complete Works of Yokomitsu Riichi] (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1982), 14:312.

the West does not mean that Japanese film critics created their own theories from scratch. On the contrary, it was their serious and persistent aspirations to catch up with the latest trends in film theory and practice outside Japan.⁸ The fact is that Japanese critics of the time acknowledged fully a crucial shift toward realism occurring in Europe at the turn of the thirties, witnessing the emergence of such new movements as the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), the British documentary film movement, French Poetic Realism, and Soviet Socialist Realism. Given these complicated encounters between the West and the non-West regarding both realism and modernism, how can I address the issues of realism in Japanese cinema without simply assuming it as the imitation of the Western model of the nineteenth-century realism?

In his 1988 article tactfully entitled “Existence of Italy,” Fredric Jameson provides insightful suggestions to solve the problem I have posed. Jameson begins his argument by pointing out that the theoretical uniqueness and historical significance of realism lie in its contradictory status, one that allows the coexistence of epistemological and aesthetic impulses whenever it claims to be the truthful representation of reality.⁹ If the ingression of the epistemological impulse into the realm of the aesthetic stemmed from a particular historical demand, then it must be the demand of modernity which has been eagerly seeking the objective truth through its numerous scientific findings and technological inventions. However, our conventional assessment of realism has always posited it against modernism, even when we talk about realism in cinema, a genuine invention of the modern period. To break with this convention, Jameson urges us to think of realism as a “form of demiurgic praxis” that endows “some active and even

⁸ Indeed, the major film theories by Hugo Münsterberg, Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Béla Balázs were all translated into Japanese by the mid-1930s.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Existence of Italy,” in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 158.

playful/experimental impulse to the inertia of its appearance as a copy or representation of things,” and in turn of modernism as a “discovery procedure like science, a process of attention no less demanding and disciplined than submission to free association.”¹⁰ What Jameson tries to do here is, of course, not to deconstruct the concepts of realism and modernism per se, but to foreground a certain continuity between realism and modernism, a continuity that I argue takes shape more clearly in Japan’s peculiar historical and cultural contexts.

Since Jameson’s daring attempt to challenge the conventional opposition between realism and modernism, not a few film scholars have begun to reconsider the complex nature of cinematic realism more profoundly. For instance, in her introduction to *Rites of Realism* (2003) Ivone Margulies emphasizes that “the essays [in this volume] focus on issues that had become taboo in the 1970s theoretical equation of realism and essentialism,” drawing on André Bazin’s notion of “the contingency of reality” which is inevitably captured by the camera and itself functions to “flesh out the changeable nature of realism and provide categories in which to consider new emerging representational aesthetics.”¹¹ Also, in his 2006 book *Realist Film Theory and Cinema*, Ian Aitken undertakes a more radical defense of realism with his strong belief that “the origins, objectives and central characteristics of nineteenth-century realism have...not been sufficiently understood within the field of film studies”¹² and thus provides his extensive, if not self-righteous, account of the complexity and possibility of the nineteenth-century French realist and naturalist tradition. In many ways, my dissertation is consonant with

¹⁰ Ibid., 162-163.

¹¹ Ivone Margulies, “Bodies Too Much,” in Ivone Margulies, ed., *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.

¹² Ian Aitken, *Realist Film Theory and Cinema: The Nineteenth-Century Luckácsian and Intuitionist Realist Traditions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 8.

this recent revival of realism as a critical term. But my focus is also different from it because I will not examine realist film theories and practices in Japan through the established definitions of realism already given by Bazin or any nineteenth-century European realist writers. Rather, I will try to scrutinize the multiple and often conflicting connotations that Japanese realists attributed to what they considered to be realism.

To summarize, my dissertation will explore the rise of realist filmmaking and criticism in Japan by redefining it as a genuine modern phenomenon of the twentieth century—the century of cinema—as in other European countries like France. The modernity Japan has experienced since the coming of sound to cinema in the thirties (or more precisely, since the end of WWI) is not a belated or different modernity, but rather belongs to what the historian of Japan Harry Harootunian calls “co-eval modernity.” Unlike the adjectives like “alternative” or “retroactive” which always have an implication of “exceptionalism,” the term “co-eval,” says Harootunian, “suggests contemporaneity [of modern experience] yet the possibility of difference.”¹³ In other words, Japan and other European countries simultaneously conceived of realism as the most promising and suitable method for filmmaking in the sound period, but the ways in which they practiced this shift also clearly reflect each country’s different cultural, political, and historical backgrounds. Studying the problems of realism in Japanese film, I believe, must provide us with a new perspective for reconsidering modernity at large, a perspective that is no longer entrenched in the hierarchical dyads of pre-modern/modern, non-West/West, and universalism/particularism.¹⁴ With this new perspective, I contend that the time has come

¹³ Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), xvi-xvii.

¹⁴ For the problematic of these hierarchal dyads, see Naoki Sakai, “Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87.3 (Summer 1988): 475-504.

to dispel the specter of post-structuralism that criticized realism for its alleged idealistic, regressive, and conservative claims. As Jameson says, we have to “learn again, by experience, what genuine realism ‘really’ is.”¹⁵

Extant Research

As I have already mentioned, the traditions of Japanese realist film theory and practice have been largely overlooked in both Japanese- and English-language academic research. General histories of Japanese cinema written either in Japanese (Tanaka Jun'ichiro's five-volume *Nihon eiga hattatsushi* [History of the Development of Japanese Film] Satō Tadao's four-volume *Nihon eigashi* [Japanese Film History]) or English (J. L. Anderson and Donald Richie's *The Japanese Film: Art and History*) refer to several historical moments (either in the mid-1930s or the late 1940s) wherein realist filmmaking became the major force of the Japanese film industry, but their accounts were limited to merely mentioning the realism of specific authors (i.e., Mizoguchi Kenji and Kurosawa Akira) or of some independent production companies appearing in the late 1940s and the early 1950s with the help of the Japan Communist Party (i.e., Imai Tadashi's and Yamamoto Satsuo's *Shinsei Eigasha*).

The books dealing with the period covered in my dissertation (from the mid 1930s to the late 1950s) also pay little attention to the rise of realism as the dominant mode of filmmaking for the sake of more visible and disturbing matters of the period: the war and the US occupation. Peter B. High's *The Imperial Screen* (2003) offers an extensive survey of Japanese film culture during the wartime period and yet does not discuss in any

¹⁵ Jameson, “Existence of Italy,” 174.

detail the significant role realism played in the mid-to-late 1930s. Also focusing on the years between 1936-1941, Darrel W. Davis' *Picturing Japaneseness* (1992) makes a blind assumption that most of the Japanese films of the thirties solely functioned as a vehicle for advocating the nativist ideology of militarist Japan ("the imperial Japanese aura") without inquiring what was really at stake on the pages of Japanese film journals of the time. As a result, Davis one-sidedly seeks in what he calls the "monumental style," the visual marker that distinguishes Japanese films from other European and Hollywood films, just as Noël Burch has praised in his *To the Distant Observer* (1979) Japanese films of the same period as a "non-Western, specifically Asiatic film."¹⁶ The first scholarly book in English of the Japanese film practice under the US occupation period, Kyoko Hirano's *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo* (1992) mainly explores how the Occupation government's policies on films (especially censorship) changed the thematic of postwar Japanese cinema, but, again, realism is not a major topic she picks up in her study.

Given the lack of scholarship devoted to the issue of realism in Japanese film, it is no exaggeration to say that my dissertation will be the first comprehensive study of the topic. And yet if there were a forerunner to my study, it would be Abé Mark Nornes' 2003 book *Japanese Documentary Film: The Meiji Era through Hiroshima*. Though it does not center on realism in fiction films, the main scope of my dissertation, the book nonetheless inspires me to the extent that it traces Japanese's keen and persistent interest in the relationship between cinema and reality through a diachronic history not divided by Japan's surrender in 1945. Moreover, I cannot agree more with his remarks on the problematic of the extant research on Japanese cinema in general:

¹⁶ Burch, *To the Distant Observer*, 144.

Most histories of the Japanese cinema concentrate on textual analysis and auteur study to the exclusion on all else. This is generally true of most writing on Asian cinema, where little attention has been paid to other discourses surrounding cinema, particularly those involving written texts. This has created the impression that serious film criticism and theory are the exclusive domain of the West.¹⁷

This is exactly what I will challenge through my own study of Japanese realist film theories and practice.

Structure of Proposed Dissertation

My dissertation will consist of five chapters with an introduction and an epilogue. In the introduction, I will explain Japan's historical peculiar situation, wherein Japan's belated entry into modernity has rendered ambiguous the distinction between realism and modernism. Given that the Japanese realist/naturalist literature saw its full flowering as late as 1917 with the works of the *Shirakabaha* (White Birch School), I suggest that realism in Japan (and especially in Japanese film) can be seen as a modern phenomenon of the twentieth century, calling for a new framework which is not necessarily drawing on the Western model of the nineteenth-century realist literature. As a theoretical backdrop for my argument, I refer to two alternative models for realism and modernity proposed by first Fredric Jameson ("realism as a form of demiurgic praxis") and second Harry Harootunian ("co-eval modernity").

In the first chapter, I will examine the first theoretical debates in Japan devoted to theorizing cinema's rediscovery of reality brought about by the advent of sound film, focusing on how they were both the continuation of and a break with the main concerns of film theory in the silent period. After providing an overview of the bulk of Japanese

¹⁷ Abé Mark Nornes, *Japanese Documentary Film: The Meiji Era through Hiroshima* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xviii.

realist film theories published between 1936 and 1941 by situating them in the historical and cultural contexts of Japan before Pearl Harbor, I will pick up and look closely at three different approaches to realism: epistemological realism (Tosaka Jun and Ueno Kōzō); aesthetic realism (Sugiyama Heiichi and Tsumura Hideo); and phenomenological realism (Nagae Michitarō). While measuring the richness of their theorizations, I will compare them with their European counterparts such as Walter Benjamin, André Bazin, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In the second chapter, I will consider major Japanese realist films produced in the same period, focusing on works by the studio called *Nikkatsu Tamagawa* in relation to the theories discussed in the first chapter. Founded in 1934 as the contemporary film (*gendaigeki*) department of Nikkatsu, the oldest major studio in Japan, the studio soon acquired a reputation for their high-brow realist films mostly adopted from popular domestic novels of the time including Ishikawa Tatsuzo's *Sōbō* (The Common People, dir. Kumagai Hisatora, 1937) and Yamamoto Yuzō's *Robō no ishi* (A Stone by the Roadside, dir. Tasaka Tomotaka, 1938). Depicting a brief history of the studio, I will draw my attention to Uchida Tomu, arguably the best director of Japanese realist films ever, and analyze his most famous work *Tsuchi* (Earth, 1938) in comparison with French Poetic Realism. Despite their similar approaches in the extensive use of location shooting, these two French and Japanese realist camps, I argue, clearly differed in the ideological missions they maintained.

In the third chapter, I will examine how the momentum behind the Japanese realist filmmaking of the thirties became crippled, if not extinct, in the years 1941-1945, as the war against the United States, or the Greater East Asia war proceeded. I want to

consider this shift in pace and direction by tracing the historical path that the quasi-non-fiction film genre called *bunka eiga* (Culture Film) pursued during this period. Originally conceived of as a category for non-fiction films made for educational or scientific purposes, *bunka eiga* gradually began to function as a means of disseminating the sacred yet counterfeit mission of the war against the Allies (i.e., the liberation of Asia from the global domination by the West), allowing the ingression of fiction into this genre for the sake of propaganda. As a theoretical and historical frame of reference, I will also investigate the infamous symposium entitled “Kindai no chōkoku” (Overcoming Modernity) held in 1942 at Kyoto. If, as clarified by one of the participants, the main objective of the debate was to seek the way of overcoming the fundamental basis for modern concepts such as democracy in politics, capitalism in economics, and liberalism in philosophy, it must be interesting to ask how realism, a genuine European concept since the Renaissance, became subject to criticism under such nativist circumstances.

In the fourth chapter, I will deal with the postwar realist theories which appeared during the US occupation period (1945-1952). It was communists and advocates of social realism that took the lead in this period; thus, emphasis was put on how film could represent, or more precisely “document,” the harsh reality of postwar Japan as faithfully as possible. And yet to be faithful, according to these debates, all filmmakers must have a critical, modernized subjectivity based on their proper political consciousness. To address this pressing issue of realism and modern subjectivity (*kindaiteki jiga*) in the Occupation period, I will consider such politically informed film books as Uryū Tadao’s *Riarizumu eigaron* (On Realist Films, 1949) and Aoyama Toshio’s *Gendai eigaron nōto* (Notes on Contemporary Film Criticism), in relation to the well-known *shutaisei ronsō* (Debates on

Subjectivity) in which the coteries of the postwar literary magazine *Kindai bungaku* (Modern Literature) severely criticized prewar proletarian writers like Kobayashi Takiji for their naïve, not-fully-modernized subjectivity.

In the fifth chapter, to see how the lively debates I introduced in the previous chapter affected the practical level, I will spotlight on the films by the three representative directors of the first decade of postwar Japan—Kurosawa Akira, Kinoshita Keisuke and Imai Tadashi—in order to see how their realist styles became the canon of the postwar Japanese cinema. First, I will try a close analysis of Kurosawa’s use of location shooting in *Subarashiki nichiyōbi* (One Wonderful Sunday, 1947), *Yoidore tenshi* (Drunken Angel, 1948), and *Norainu* (Stray Dog, 1949) as an example of fiction’s ingression into contemporary reality. Then, through my reading of Kinoshita’s “women’s films” like *Onna* (Woman, 1948), *Nihon no higeki* (Tragedy of Japan, 1953), and *Onna no sono* (Women’s Land, 1954), I address how the problems of gender were depicted in his bitter realist style. Lastly, I will consider the impact and influence of Italian Neo-realism through Imai’s *Dokkoi ikiteiru* (Still We Live, 1951), a Japanese version of De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* (1948).

In the epilogue, I will reconsider the alleged opposition between modernism and realism by recapitulating major criticisms leveled against the canonical directors of the fifties by such younger modernist directors as Masumura Yasuzō, Ōshima Nagisa, and Yoshida Yoshishige. My hypothesis is that although the film styles they used in their own works differed to a large degree from their forerunners, the problem they attempted to solve in their writings had much in common with those of postwar realists in terms of their truth claims. In his famous 1959 manifesto “Sore wa toppakō ka? Nihon eiga no

kindai shugisha tachi” (Is it a Breakthrough? The Modernists of Japanese Film) Ōshima accused all the Japanese films made before Masumura of not yet being modernized. If this is the case, my research will less emphasize the opposition between modernism and realism, than try to resituate both of them within a larger context of modernization.

Schedule for Completion

I am using the current academic year to revise and finish the first chapter, which I have already written, carefully reading printed materials I collected in Japan through the research trip I conducted in this summer. I am also using the rest of the year to enrich my understanding of realism in film by attending Professor Dudley Andrew’s graduate seminar, “Realist French Film: Renoir, Bazin, Rohmer,” being held in the fall 2008 semester. I expect to spend the next summer and the 2009 fall semester doing intensive research at libraries and film archives in Japan such as the National Diet Library, the National Film Center, Engeki Hakubutsukan at Waseda University, Kawakita Kinen Eiga Bunka Zaidan, and Matsuda Eigasha. During this period, I plan to stay at Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo under the guidance of Professor Saito Ayako, who has already instructed me before when I was writing my master thesis there. In the 2010 spring semester, I anticipate working with Professor J. Victor Koschman of Cornell University, a professor of Japanese history who specializes in the “*shutaisei ronsō*” debate of the immediate postwar period, which is going to be the main topic of the fourth chapter of my dissertation. Also at Cornell, I hope to have contact with Professor Naoki Sakai, who has published extensively on the “*kindai no chōkoku*” debate in 1942, another significant topic discussed in the third chapter. At some point in this year, I also plan to conduct a

research trip to the Library of Congress because it has a good collection of wartime Japanese films, including dozens of titles that are not available in Japan. I intend to finish two—or three if possible—chapters during the 2009-2010 academic year. Then, I return to Yale and keep writing at the pace of one chapter per semester so as to finish everything by the end of 2011.

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