V-Cinema: canons of Japanese film and the challenge of video

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1. Scholars, Canons, and Videotape: Unboxing Japanese Cinema

In May of 2003, the lineup for the Directors' Fortnight section at the Cannes Film Festival included the world premiere of *Gozu (Gokudō kyōfu daigekijō Gozu*), by the Japanese director Miike Takashi. It marked the filmmaker's first Cannes selection, after several years of being a fixture of such second-tier festivals as Vancouver, Toronto, and Rotterdam, a period that included his breakthrough into international distribution and film discourse with *Audition* (*Ōdishon*) in 2000. Miike's path through the world film festival circuit is a fairly typical one: once "discovered" by the network of festival programmers and their local or regional informants that serve as the conduit into festival exposure, a steady supply of new films in following years keeps a filmmaker in tastemakers' collective eye, allowing for his regular presence among festival lineups and leading to discourse in the form of film criticism and the sale of his works for international distribution. Distribution in turn intensifies his presence in discourse by transferring his name from columns devoted to occasional festival reportage to regular coverage of new releases, after which a first selection, usually in a sidebar section, for one of the world's top three film festivals – Cannes, Venice, and Berlin – confirms his "auteur" status. The road is then paved for his entry into these festivals' prestigious competition sections and the eventual possibility of winning awards.

While this process of accrual of cultural capital commonly parallels a filmmaker's development from novice director to seasoned veteran over the course of a good handful of

feature films, by the time Miike Takashi was discovered by the gatekeepers of the international festival circuit, he had already directed more films than many established auteurs get to make in a lifetime. These previous works, however, remained invisible – from discourse, but also literally – for the fact of having been direct-to-video releases. Miike's official filmography starts with 1995's *Shinjuku Triad Society* (*Shinjuku kuroshakai*), the first film he made that was intended for theatrical release, and leaves the four preceding, and very productive, years of making direct-to-video movies unmentioned.

Obscurity is characteristic of direct-to-video (DTV) production and distribution. The market for these films exists only within the premises of the video rental store, with virtually no advertising, reviews, or other forms of discourse occurring outside of those confines. Often made on low budgets that leave no room for financing marketing campaigns, movies released directly onto video instead depend on instant appeal, through genres, stars, and such intra-textual ingredients as action scenes and nudity, all communicated to the potential viewer by way of lurid, flashy video box packaging. The British film scholar Ramon Lobato, one of the rare academics to have engaged the topic,[1] argues that the DTV market is as immense as it is invisible: in terms of sheer volume, it forms 'the empirical norm' of contemporary motion picture production, and yet, since it does not qualify for most

[1] A few other scholars have touched on DTV in their studies of film genres, notably Yvonne Tasker (1993) on action cinema, James Naremore (1998) on film noir, and Linda Ruth Williams (2005) on the erotic thriller. See chapter 3 for a discussion on these studies' approaches of DTV.

markers of institutional recognition and is rarely if ever covered in the press, Lobato also contends that it has 'the lowest discursive status of any kind of film' (Lobato 2012: 33).

With the selection of *Gozu* for Cannes the contours of this unseen backlog of works began to become visible: *Gozu* too had been intended for the Japanese home video market. It was produced by the video department of the Toei studio, the company that, in the late 1980s, had been the catalyst for streamlining direct-to-video distribution into a highly profitable business model – a parallel market for film releasing that would soon churn out well over a hundred movies a year and that would become known as "V-Cinema." But if a DTV release holds at best a 'second-string status' (Prince 1999: 121) to films that premiere theatrically, then how could *Gozu* ever have emerged from video store obscurity to make it past gatekeepers and onto the festival screen?[2] And what are we to make of the fact that such invisible sections exist in the filmographies of a good number of Japanese filmmakers launched into the festival circuit over the past three decades: not only Miike but also Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Aoyama Shinji, Nakata Hideo, Kobayashi Masahiro, or Mochizuki Rokurō, all of whom made multiple V-Cinema productions before (and most also after) they were "discovered" by foreign tastemakers?

This dissertation asks how our understanding of canons of Japanese cinema and their formation might change if we begin to take into

[2] And this was not the first time a Japanese direct-to-video production had played in Cannes: *Koroshi: Film Noir* (*Koroshi*, dir: Kobayashi Masahiro, 2000) was selected for the Director's Fortnight in 2000.

account an issue that has radically reshaped film culture, that is arguably the most transformative technological change in cinema since the introduction of sound film – indeed, that has often been called a 'revolution' – yet is rarely taken into account when we study or discuss film: video.

The word "video" has referred to a great many things since its introduction into common parlance during the 1950s. Michael Z. Newman (2014) devotes an entire book-length study to the term's various definitions, whose evolution he divides into three stages: from its initial use as a synonym for television, via a technology that, by way of the video cassette recorder (VCR), was distinct yet related to both television and film, to a moniker encompassing all moving image media. Under the latter definition, even what we go to see in a film theater today is video, since what we are watching is a digital image projection that no longer involves the medium of (celluloid) film. For the purpose of the present dissertation, however, the term "video" overlaps mostly with Newman's second stage: that of a carrier or platform for the distribution and viewing of movies, intended primarily for use in the home.[3] Caetlin Benson-Allott, who along with Newman is one of a handful of emerging scholars that have recently dedicated themselves to studying this technology, lists

[3] I shall therefore often use the term "home video", even though this too can refer to different things, for example to "home movies" – where the recording capacities of the VCR and compatible video cameras allowed consumers to create homemade moving images for direct playback on their television sets. For the sake of clarity: throughout this dissertation I shall use 'home video" to mean movies on video, i.e. the commercial availability of feature films on prerecorded videocassette and disc.

the various forms this 'medium for movies' has taken, including videotape, analog videodisc, digital videodiscs, and digital video files, all subdivided into a variety of often incompatible formats (VHS and Betamax, Cartavision and Laserdisc, DVD and Blu-ray, AVI and MPEG-4, etc.). She calls video 'an extraordinarily amorphous term for all nonfilmic means of motion picture distribution and exhibition.' (Benson-Allott 2013: 13) The topic covered in this dissertation is chiefly limited to the VHS and DVD formats, which among themselves formed the dominant means of experiencing films – or 'the movies formerly known as films' (Benson-Allott 2013: 23) – for well over three decades.

As another emerging video scholar, Lucas Hilderbrand, emphasizes, video as a medium for movies has often been defined through access and inferiority. Videotape, says Stephen Prince, 'was a low-grade medium designed for transient viewing' (Prince 1999: 124) and the academic discipline of film studies has long considered video an inferior medium: at best an approximate 'translation' (Tashiro 1991: 8) of the theatrical viewing mode and at worst a threat to the very existence of the discipline. This points to a lingering tendency on the part of film scholars, a perceived need to legitimate their discipline by way of association with other art forms, primarily literature. As Scott Nygren has pointed out, (Anglophone) film studies developed during the early 1960s out of departments of English and 'resituated the understanding of film parallel to such literary models as nationality, period, author, and genre.' (Nygren 2007: 24) As discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, the nascent discipline of film studies borrowed such

paradigms as a means of validating its existence, hoping to demonstrate that films, like novels, were works of art worth studying and that the cinema too possessed a canon of great artists – an argument for which it borrowed a not quite clearly defined term gaining traction among French and American film critics at the time: that of the film director as *auteur*, an individual artist with a unique voice and style recognizable even in products made within highly regulated industrial filmmaking environments such as the Hollywood studio system. Film scholars and film critics spent the next decade and a half happily arguing over who to include in this pantheon of great filmmakers, until the academic discipline of film studies was so well established that scholars lost interest in the exercise, turned their backs on literary models and began, as film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum (2004: xv) puts it, 'canonizing theorists rather than films and filmmakers'. They looked for new approaches to studying and theorizing cinema in the writings of, among others, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and philosopher, social theorist, and philologist Michel Foucault. In the 1990s, film studies turned away from the search for an overarching theory of film toward a more empirical approach to aspects of cinema, or what David Bordwell and Noël Carroll called 'middle-range inquiries', including issues of spectatorship and the economics of film production and distribution. Video, however, continued to be regarded as inferior and devoid of merit, despite having long since proven its economic value for the film industry.

At the same time, while many scholarly inquiries dealt with non-canonical aspects of cinema, few thought to employ these new

approaches and findings as a means to reassess canon formation – or, for that matter, to engage with Japanese cinema. In film studies, Japan has long served as the ideal "Other" to the norm (i.e. Hollywood). The age of "post-theory", however, saw scholars returning en masse to focus on the norm to define the many "others" existing within it, whose presence had long been overlooked – hence the surge in interest in issues of groups of spectators, including female spectatorship, black spectatorship, and so on. After forming the ideal cypher for the interests of film scholars in previous stages of the discipline's development, from the 1990s onward Japanese cinema seemed to no longer be a topic of great interest to film scholars.

How, then, do we situate Japanese cinema in this, still ongoing, era of "post-theory"? Can it still retain a position of note when the study of cinema, or more precisely "moving image media", has fragmented into a wide spectrum of "middle-range inquiries"? Can any national cinema do so? Does the notion of national cinema even matter anymore? And with that, do canons still matter?

In comes video.

As Isolde Standish notes (2006: 16-17), one of the dominant narratives for the study of Japanese film and its history follows a pattern of development, achievement, and decline, positing one specific period as a 'golden age': a period roughly equal to the 1950s, from the end of the postwar Occupation forces' censorship of Japanese films in 1948 through the widespread adoption of television and the subsequent decline in cinema attendance in the first half of the 1960s. This is argued in terms of product output, the

perceived quality of the films, the number of "master" directors active, awards won at foreign festivals, and record-setting audience attendance at film theaters in Japan. The narrative of decline is then justified by pointing toward a falling-off in audience attendance that continues all the way into the late 1990s, with a record low of 122.9 million in 1996 contrasting sharply with the record high of over 1.1 billion in 1958. But when it comes to a more recent era in Japanese film, we are arguably dealing with a far more diverse and vibrant film scene, in terms of industry as well as art, than official statistics can convey. In the age of media convergence, after rental video, cable, pay-per-view, downloading, and video on demand, are we seriously still considering recent developments in cinema in relation to the rise of television?

The largely ignored, in discourse but also in official statistics, home video market not only challenges prevalent perceptions of a gradual industrial and creative decline of Japanese cinema that supposedly goes hand in hand with dwindling audience numbers, it also provides an impetus to reassess film scholarship, including issues of canon formation. In the writings of for instance David Desser, Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener we've seen emerge an interest in new forms of cinephilia, those devoted to Hong Kong action films or Japanese animation for example. This interest starts from the premise that the broadening of access to films that has resulted from the explosive growth of home video makes it increasingly feasible, as well as desirable, for film scholars to look at the margins of film culture, where film is no longer

– and no longer needs to be – great art.[4] Jeffrey Sconce's analysis of paracinema, the celebration of films maligned by dominant film culture, not only investigates marginal films and film cultures, but also frames this as an issue of canon formation. Here, the forms and arguments of the dominant taste culture that shapes official canons are consciously subverted and challenged – by positing that, say, the ineptitude on display in the 1960s sci-fi films of "schlockmeister" Larry Buchanan produces the same 'sense of alienation, despair and existential angst' as the films of Ingmar Bergman. (Sconce 1995: 382) Alternatively, paracinematic discourse will emulate these dominant forms and arguments, either unintentionally or in a paradoxical movement toward legitimacy.

Similar concerns underpin Ramon Lobato's research into informal patterns of film distribution, in which he argues that the countless forms of film production, distribution, and exhibition that have little or no connection to the 'product pipelines' of the Hollywood studios form an opportunity 'to recalibrate our research paradigms to better fit the realities of how film is being accessed in a globalised and convergent world.' One of the specific cases he investigates is direct-to-video distribution, which, he contends, challenges the notions of cultural value that underlie our canons of cinema: ideas about films as unique and powerful 'isolated aesthetic objects' no longer hold true if we are dealing with thousands of films per year, most of which 'disappear off the

[4] Although David Bordwell's formalist writings on some of these cinematic forms contend that they do indeed deserve to be considered as great film art. See for example Bordwell 2011.

radar without having made any kind of mark.' (Lobato 2012: 21)

As previously noted, in terms of sheer numbers, DTV is the empirical norm of contemporary motion picture production. And Japan, which has a large enough domestic market to sustain a commercial film industry, developed its own market for movies released directly onto video, one with a strictly domestic scope: V-Cinema. As we will see in chapters 3 and 4, as a model of production and distribution, V-Cinema forms a textbook example of DTV, displaying all the characteristics described by Lobato. Paradoxically, however, it has not resisted existing notions of cultural value, has not resisted institutional recognition, and does not resist canonization.

Why have such alumni of V-Cinema as Miike Takashi, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and Aoyama Shinji for many years been regulars and award winners at Cannes, Venice, and Berlin – surely markers of institutional recognition if ever there were any? Why has Hollywood gone out of its way to remake Japanese horror films? What are the characteristics inherent in V-Cinema that allow for all of the above readings? How could a commercial distribution strategy with little or no artistic ambition and oriented almost entirely toward the domestic video market provide a platform for the rise of new auteurs, films, forms, and genres into the global film culture? What mechanisms of canonization are at work that consider or include V-Cinema? And what meaning does this hold for the ways we study Japanese cinema?

In posing these questions, this dissertation diverges from the sole study of V-Cinema undertaken in academia until now: two chapters on the topic in Alexander Zahlten's

2007 doctoral dissertation, which form a pioneering effort at mapping the gestation, formation, and practices of V-Cinema. I have relied on them to a great extent, and while I consider our two studies to be complementary, I do deviate sharply from Zahlten's methods and conclusions. Zahlten argues that a consistent focus on exceptionalism in the study of Japanese film hinders understanding of the workings of film production, distribution, and exhibition. His method is to reject or minimize exceptions and to focus squarely on the overlooked conventions, filling in the gaps with a wealth of new knowledge. While I agree with his initial assessment that much has been left obfuscated as a result of this prioritizing of the exceptional (as well as the prioritizing of textual factors) and that many gaps remain to be filled, I do not feel that we need to minimize the importance of exceptions in order to redress the balance. It must not be disregarded that those exceptions have been powerful agents of change in the ways Japanese cinema has been regarded, made, and diffused. Rather, we must place and study those exceptions in their proper context. We need to refrain from seeing exceptionalism as an excuse for elitism – the kind of persistent attitude that presumes that Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu form the zenith and that it's all downhill from there.[5] Instead, my aim is to argue that the exceptions can help us to better understand the workings of film production, distribution, and exhibition – and vice versa – for the simple fact that there

[5] The ongoing debate over who ought to be regarded as Japan's "fourth master" – names that have been put forward include Naruse Mikio, Ōshima Nagisa, and Imamura Shōhei – changes nothing about this situation.

are no exceptions without rules, and, arguably, no rules without at least a few exceptions.

That auteurism has fallen out of favor in academic film scholarship, including in Zahlten's, should not obscure the fact that it remains to this day one of the most powerful tools for ordering, selecting, and presenting world cinema. As Stringer and Phillips emphasize: 'whether film scholars like it or not, Japanese cinema continues to circulate globally [...] largely on the basis of the specific values that have accrued across time around the reputations of a few key "*auteurs*"'. (Stringer and Phillips 2007: 14) The symbol of the auteur – and its changing meaning – remains a useful instrument for gatekeepers in furthering their own interests, including festival directors, critics, and distributors. This implies that canon formation in cinema is, as film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum argues, an ongoing and active process of selection, not a passive one of reportage. Behind the canon therefore lies an intricate network of decisions that encompass and shape every stage in a film's life cycle: production, diffusion, and exhibition – including the fact that many films, not in the least the canonized works, have multiple life cycles thanks to revival screenings, career retrospectives, and, indeed, home video. Even if we were to assume that the canon is set in stone, we should still ask ourselves where the material came from, who did the sculpting, and why they chose this particular shape. Philips and Stringer argue, somewhat less convincingly, that the reception of Japanese cinema outside Japan 'has to some extent always been determined by the vagaries of international festival and distribution networks' (Phillips and Stringer 2007: 9). But just that these decisions cannot be predicted does not

mean they cannot be retraced, in such a way as to elucidate, to a large extent, these supposed vagaries and to lay bare the mechanisms, networks, actors, and stakes at work behind them.