



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Mes, T.P.

Citation

Mes, T. P. (2018, January 9). *V-Cinema: canons of Japanese film and the challenge of video*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/61126>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/61126>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The following handle holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation:
<http://hdl.handle.net/1887/61126>

Author: Mes, T.P.

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

Issue Date: 2018-01-09

3. Video Revolutions: Models of Video Distribution in Japan and the U.S.A.

Home video has its own canonical history, one that has been written almost exclusively by Americans. Inevitably, given video's relatively young age as a consumer commodity, historiography is a recent phenomenon, one that in terms of film studies can be traced back largely to Frederick Wasser's 2002 publication *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*.¹ By its title alone, Wasser's study set

¹ Though there exist a number of notable predecessors, such as: James Lardner's *Fast Forward: Hollywood, the Japanese, and the VCR Wars* (1988); Mark Levy's *The VCR Age: Home Video and Mass Communication* (1989); Julia Dobrow's *Social and Cultural Aspects of VCR Use* (1990); Eugene Marlow and Eugene Secunda's *Shifting Time and Space: The Story of Video Tape* (1991); Ann Gray's *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure*

the tone for those that followed, who almost without exception focused on various aspects of video's function as a medium between the Hollywood film industry and the American consumer.² This focus on the Hollywood system and audience reception identifies the

Technology (1992); and the chapters on video in Douglas Gomery's *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (1992); Janet Wasko's *Hollywood in the Information Age: Beyond the Silver Screen* (1994); and Stephen Prince's *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (1999).

² Notably: Joshua M. Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (2008); Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (2009); Caetlin Benson-Allot, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (2013); Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (2014); Newman, Michael Z., *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (2014).

recent surge in video scholarship as belonging firmly in the age of *Post-Theory*; the notion (if not quite the discipline) of video studies has in the past eight years or so found its place among the “middle-range inquiries” that have come to characterize film and media studies since the latter half of the 1990s.³

Video, however, made its indelible mark on the discipline some time before this new wave of scholarship and the reactions it initially engendered could serve as textbook examples of what Bordwell and Carroll identified as problematic about the state of film studies in their 1996 volume. ‘I think I heard the sound of Film Studies desiring the spectacle of its own

destruction,’ reported Bruce Kawin in the pages of *Film Quarterly*, on a 1988 conference co-organized by the Society for Cinema Studies (SCS) and the University Film and Video Association that was rife with debate over ‘whether film or video is the proper medium in which to teach the history, analysis, production, and theory of film.’ (Kawin 1988: 57) Video won, lamented Kawin, who ‘heard people selling wallpaper for the house of bondage, rationalizing the lowering of pedagogical standards by complaining how underfunded their courses were.’ (Ibid. 58) The SCS itself echoed Kawin’s assessment, albeit in less flustered terms, when it concluded its ‘Statement on the Use of Video in the Classroom’ (1991) with the words: ‘To substitute video for film is to engage in a form of counterfeiting that threatens to seriously compromise the integrity of film study and to

³ See also the eclectic collection of articles that comprises the inaugural issue of the online journal *Media Fields*, revolving around the theme of ‘Video Stores’ (2010): <http://www.mediafieldsjournal.org/issue-1/>

erode the high standards that the discipline has painstakingly established for itself over the last two decades'.⁴ The statement was based in part on the empirical data provided by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in the third edition of *Film Art*, which included a side-by-side comparison of film and video, in terms of image quality, aspect ratio, availability of titles, and suitability as a storage medium (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 22). Scholars were quick to pick up on the theme now that there was an "official" word: Sean Cubitt's *Timeshift: On Video Culture* (1991) was one of the first books on the subject by a film scholar. Though willing to meet the medium on its own terms, it nevertheless reverberated that '[w]e have paid

⁴ Society for Cinema Studies Task Force on Film Integrity, 'Statement on the Use of Video in the Classroom', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), p. 6.

for domestic convenience with a major drop in standards from the clarity and scale of sound and image in the heyday of the cinema'. (Cubitt 1991: 8).

This resistance toward video on the part of the SCS and individual scholars was largely motivated by the fact that many departments of film study across the U.S.A. were faced with shrinking budgets for film rental and purchase. That videotapes and videodiscs (or laserdiscs) cost less to acquire and were easier in use was a recurring argument for the switch away from screening film prints in class. Those opposed reacted with what Michael Z. Newman later called 'a rhetoric of authenticity' (Newman 2014: 49), as per Cubitt's reference to an unspecified 'heyday of cinema', which insisted that the only possible way to fully appreciate cinema was when it was projected from film onto a large

screen in a darkened theater.⁵ Cinephile criticism of the video format often resorted to such rhetoric over the years, pointing out that the home, with its myriad distractions, was an unsuitable place for film appreciation. Barbara Klinger argues that this attitude held back fuller study of non-theatrical exhibition contexts and forms of spectatorship.⁶

⁵ This oft-repeated argument ignores the fact that the early history of cinema is rife with formats intended for home use as ‘parlor cinema’ (Klinger 2006: 6), including Edison’s Home Kinetoscope and the Pathé-Frères’s Pathé Kok projector, both launched in 1912. Special gauges such as 22mm and 28mm and non-flammable film stock were developed to facilitate home use. The popularity of the Pathé Baby 9.5mm projector, introduced in 1921, even prompted Pathé to publish, from February 1926, a monthly magazine listing new film releases for home viewing, *Le Cinéma chez soi* (‘Home cinema’). See Abel 2005: 18.

⁶ One could apply Klinger’s argument to explain the sixteen-year gap between 1992 (Gray’s *Video Playtime*)

‘Thinking about the reception of films in such “nondedicated” locales is key to grasping the depth and breadth of cinema’s social circulation and cultural function. Among nontheatrical exhibition venues, the home is particularly noteworthy for its persistent historical role as an ancillary forum for studio pictures and for its substantial contemporary economic significance to the industry.’

(Klinger 2006: 4)

and 2008 (Greenberg’s *From Betamax to Blockbuster*), during which Wasser’s *Veni, Vidi, Video* (2002) is the only book-length academic study on the topic of video to appear in the English language.

Charles Tashiro enumerated the terms of the argument against video once more in his article 'Videophilia: What Happens When You Wait for It on Video' (1991), in which he focuses on the process of what he calls the 'translation' of a film to VHS and laserdisc. However, while he concurs with the SCS statement, he also posits a caveat by asking, 'which violates the film more, a good video or a bad [film] print?' In Tashiro's view, 'a good video' was not a videocassette but a videodisc.⁷ There is an irony in academia's begrudging acknowledgment of the laserdisc in this discourse, in that it remained an otherwise marginal, 'prestigious' (Greenberg 2008: 140)

⁷ Tashiro admits early on in his article that he had previously been employed at laserdisc distributor The Criterion Collection, but goes on to provide examples from his practical experience as support for the findings of Bordwell and Thompson and the SCS statement.

format that catered almost exclusively to a select group of devoted collectors and had no impact on the wider audience frequenting video rental shops.⁸ This begs a question: was academia's fierce criticism of video perhaps a veiled attempt to ensure it would not lose its role as gatekeeper? After all, by allowing the viewer access to a wealth of titles and by affording him or her the ability to pause, rewind, fast-forward, and advance a film frame by frame, video as a widespread consumer commodity made it possible for anyone, not just those who joined the official institutions, to study the very fabric of a film. 'Whether we like it or not,' Tashiro noted tellingly, 'home video

⁸ The total number of videodisc players sold in the United States between 1980 and 1989 was 1.467 million. By comparison, 74.460 million VCRs were sold during this same period. (Prince 1999: 95)

turns us all into critics.’ (Tashiro 1991: 15) If the discipline of film studies were forced to operate on the same playing field as the average video store member, the gatekeeper would no longer be able to, in Barzilai-Nahon’s term, control information and lock in its gated, and it would subsequently lose its network and thus its purpose. That this did not come to pass means that the status and value of the discipline depended on more than merely access to film prints and the ability to screen them properly. Nevertheless, the fact that Kawin and Cubitt resorted to often antagonistic and sometimes outright bellicose (‘raid’, ‘attack’, ‘war’) terminologies when referring to video suggests that the format, through its commercial success and wide acceptance, held the potential to disrupt established

networks of authority.⁹ That Hollywood had initially demonstrated an even greater degree of hostility toward the format a decade earlier further substantiates that video possessed disruptive potential; it was seen as a medium of ‘suspect legality and potentially damaging uses’ (Hilderbrand 2009: 5), one that could hypothetically cause the collapse of entire existing institutions.¹⁰ The rapid, widespread adoption of home video in the first half of the

⁹ Though it is likely that what got these two scholars somewhat carried away in their arguments was their reliance on the model of Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), which was written under the yoke of Nazi rule.

¹⁰ Even of national identity, as Benson-Allott’s analysis of the British ‘video nasties’ scare shows: ‘In the early 1980s, it seems, there were few boogeymen better suited for phantasmic assaults on national tradition than the videotape.’ See Benson-Allott 2013: 99-101.

1980s is generally referred to in both popular and academic writing as a 'video revolution'¹¹ [Figure 2], yet as Linda Ruth Williams notes (2005: 253), considering film historians' dedicated interest in past cinematic revolutions, it is surprising that this massive contemporary shift was not discussed more extensively. Arguably, the video revolution did more to strengthen such institutions as the Hollywood film industry and academic film study than to topple them: by 1986, for example, the Hollywood studios were making more money from home video than from theatrical exhibition. (Wasko 1994: 3) And so, as David Bordwell points out, '[a] cinema

¹¹ The term 'video revolution' graced the covers of *Newsweek*, August 6, 1984, and *Time*, December 24, 1984; for its use in titles of scholarly texts, see Wasko 1994: 113; and Newman 2014.

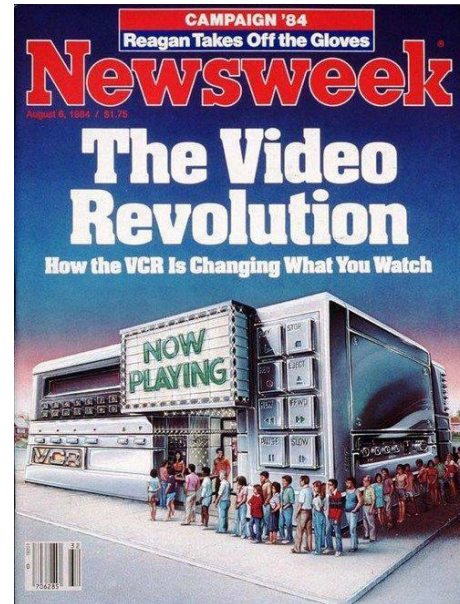


Figure 2: 'The Video Revolution', cover of *Newsweek*, August 6, 1984

packaged in VHS came naturally to a generation who grew up time-shifting' (2011: 58). Benson-Allott, Greenberg, Hilderbrand, Herbert, and Newman are 'scholars who cannot remember life before the VCR' (Benson-Allott 2013: 18): born during the 1970s, they grew up watching videos at home and therefore logically see a merit in studying it as a medium for movies. To them, video signifies not a disruption but a simple fact of life.

Additionally, the arrival and establishment of DVD around the turn of the millennium created the symbolic closing of the era of the videocassette, while online forms of distribution further intensified this idea through the resulting widespread closure of video rental shops. These changes in the media landscape invited a retrospective approach and provided an impetus for comparative study of video.

That the story of video has already achieved the status of a 'canonical history' (Greenberg 2008: 2) creates the risk of repeating the mistake of, intentionally or inadvertently, holding up the American model (and by extension Hollywood cinema) as the norm for the study of movies on video. Just as there exist different canons of cinema, there exist many histories of home video side by side. Depending on which country one chooses to focus on, these stories are quite distinct, as UNESCO noticed as early as 1985, when it commissioned the study *Video World-Wide*, carried out in multiple territories across the five continents.¹² Nevertheless, given this

¹² Alvarado, Manuel (ed.) (1988), *Video World-Wide: An International Study*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation / London: John Libbey & Company, 1985

wealth of literature and with the country's well-developed infrastructure of film distribution, as well as the early and wide adoption of video technology by consumers across all social strata, the American situation serves as a useful point of comparison that anyone studying the topic would be foolish to ignore. Using the works of the scholars mentioned above and others as a premise, this chapter therefore compares the development of the home video market in the United States with the contemporaneous situation in Japan.

I – Home Video Distribution: A Tale of Two Systems

A side-by-side comparison offers a striking contrast between the motivations that led to the development of the home video markets in

the U.S. and in Japan. In spite of the dominant position of the Hollywood studios in the American media landscape, the film industry was for the most part outright hostile to the VCR and by extension to the idea of releasing films on prerecorded videocassettes, as well as to the notion of videotape rental; the latter two would become the very reason for home video's runaway success with consumers. In Japan, on the other hand, the established film industry was not only supportive of the development of a market for movies on video, but it actively led the way in its creation.

According to Greenberg, the general history of video and the movies has over time been narrowed down to three 'canonical moments': the *Universal vs. Sony* legal dispute (also known as the "Betamax Case"); the dominance of VHS over Betamax; and pornography's early importance to the home

video industry. In his attempt to counter the predominance of these developments in the general discourse, he disparagingly qualifies them as ‘two parables and a bit of folk wisdom’, something that ‘a business professor might throw into a lecture as a case history’ (Greenberg 2008: 2). He argues that there exists a parallel history and that ‘the invention of movies on video’ was the work of a select number of mediators: distributors, retailers, and other middlemen inhabiting the spaces in between producers and consumers, who were responsible for creating two key concepts in the development of home video: movies on videocassette and the video rental store.

This of course refers to the situation in the United States. Few video scholars feel the need to emphasize this simple fact, which has resulted in another, overlapping canonical account of video’s history in which “the

Japanese” merely supplied the technology, while Americans seemingly created a billion-dollar consumer market out of something for which this technology was supposedly not even intended: watching prerecorded content, particularly movies, on videocassette. Such an account is misleading in two ways: one, Sony may have introduced the Betamax home video cassette recorder in 1975 and JVC its VHS (Video Home System) a year later, but both were preceded by numerous formats for both industrial and consumer use, developed by American parties as well as Japanese since the 1950s;¹³ two, the development of a market for prerecorded video content began in Japan

¹³ California-based Ampex was the first to market a videotape recorder (VTR) for industrial use in 1956. For a detailed account of the technological development of video machines, see Lardner 1988: 50-94; and for a more concise overview, see Newman 2014: 24-32.

as early as the late 1960s, with the first video rental stores opening their doors to the public in Tokyo and Nagoya in 1977, the same year the first video stores opened in the United States.

As Wasser, Greenberg, Herbert, and others have pointed out, the initial marketing and promotion of Betamax and VHS in North America emphasized the machines' capacity for "time shifting": the ability to record programs off the air for later viewing.¹⁴ 'Watch Whatever Whenever', read one ad for the Sony Betamax: 'For years you've watched TV shows

¹⁴ The same was true in Japan, as Jonathan Clements notes: 'Until the early 1980s, the on-screen content visible in Japanese VCR commercials seemed deliberately restricted to sports, live events or indistinct nature images, as if the manufacturers dare not admit the VCR's application for watching copyrighted works.' (Clements 2013: 161)



Figure 3: Sony Betamax ad 1

at the times you've had to. Now you can watch them at the times you want to.' [Figure 3] Neither Sony nor JVC envisioned their products as machines for watching movies, focusing instead on their function as an extension of the television instead. From a historical perspective this makes sense, as video technology had, since its inception in the late 1950s, been used predominantly in television broadcasting. As Michael Z. Newman points out (2014: 17), the term "video" was initially synonymous with television and widely applied to distinguish it from "radio", even before television began using video technology as an alternative to live broadcasting.¹⁵ Sony's U-Matic, introduced in

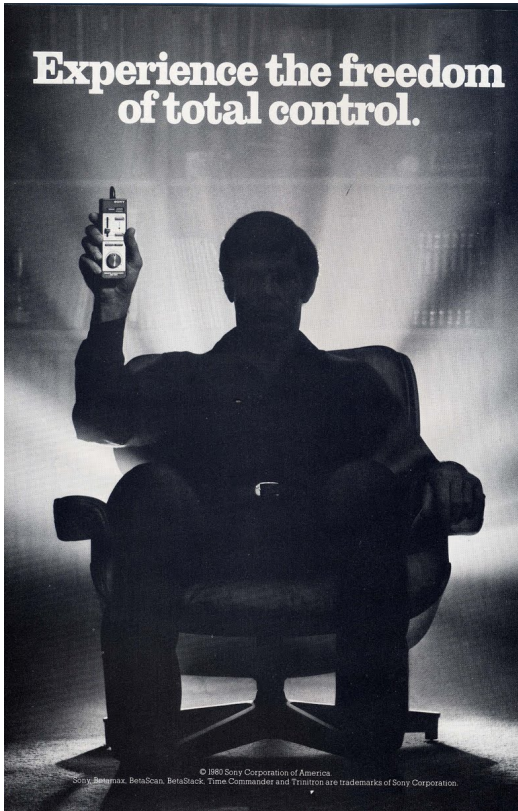
¹⁵ Newman also explores how critical reactions to the increasing dominance of recorded content over live broadcasting already prompted a 'rhetoric of authenticity'

1971, was the first video recording device to use cassettes as opposed to reel-to-reel tape and while it never took off as a consumer item (in spite of initially being marketed as such), it was used in numerous institutional and industrial capacities. A portable version of the machine introduced in 1974 gave the television industry the possibility of Electronic News Gathering (ENG), on-location reporting for immediate playback and broadcast, where 16mm cameras had previously been the norm. Without the need to first develop film, breaking news now broke even faster.

The launch of Betamax as a lighter, more affordable video cassette recorder (VCR)

that foreshadowed the later negative reactions to home video (Newman 2014: 22-23). This means that video has been haunted by the stigma of inferiority almost from its inception.

Experience the freedom of total control.



© 1983 Sony Corporation of America
Sony, Betamax, BetaScan, BetaStack, Time Commander and Trinitron are trademarks of Sony Corporation.

The new Sony Betamax SL-5800 frees you from the restraints of time, memory and circumstance. And makes you master of them all.

Mastering time, memory and circumstance.

The Betamax gives you the power to alter the fabric of time itself. You can record one channel while watching another.

You can program it to record a variety of shows on four different channels, for up to fourteen days in advance. And with our optional BetaStack tape changer you can even record up to twenty solid hours of consecutive programming.

If having all this programming in the palm of your hand seems a bit overwhelming, we've got some more good news for you.

Mastering motion.

The Sony Betamax SL-5800 has a remarkable feature called BetaScan that allows you to find any single image from amongst the thousands of images on a tape many hours long. BetaScan lets you go fast forward or reverse without interrupting the image on the screen. A Variable BetaScan feature lets you adjust the speed at which you can view the tape from five times up to twenty times normal speed. A Variable slow motion feature allows you to go from Freeze Frame up to one-third

normal speed. And our Freeze Frame is really frozen. It's clear and still and optically true, without noise lines or distortion.

Mastering space.

This Betamax also has a Time Commander Remote Control feature that lets you utilize Variable BetaScan, Variable Slow-motion, Frame-by-Frame Advance and Freeze Framing, without moving from the comfort of your bed or easy chair.

Mastering the medium.

The elegant, sophisticated technology of the Betamax SL-5800 gives you a new kind of freedom. It lets you record whether you're home or away. It gives you access to a vast variety of programming that you can buy or rent. And a Sony Portable Videotape Camera enables you to actually make your own programs, and play them back instantly.

The Sony Betamax SL-5800 lets you shape and mold television to conform to your desires, to satisfy your own particular needs and interests. It allows you to make the final decision about what you'll watch and the way you'll watch it. It presents you with an almost infinite possibility of choices. And that's what freedom is all about.



SONY
THE ONE AND ONLY

Models shown: Betamax SL-5800, KV1945E

Figure 4: Sony Betamax ad 2

for the consumer market followed on more than a decade of popular media speculation about how video would give television audiences agency over ‘the wilderness of mass programming’ (Newman 2014: 30). This discourse revolved around the idea of empowerment: ‘the hegemony of the networks would be stopped and the viewer newly installed as master of his own leisure experience.’ (Newman 2014: 31-32) A 1980 Sony Betamax advertisement promised consumers that they could ‘Experience the freedom of total control’, with an image of a man sitting in an armchair, holding aloft a remote control device while dramatic backlighting makes him appear almost godlike [Figure 4].

It was also a Sony Betamax advert that brought to the surface the fear and hostility toward home video that existed within the

Hollywood film industry. In September 1976, a letter arrived at the legal department of Universal Pictures, seeking the studio’s agreement with copy for a proposed advert that was to read: ‘Now you don’t have to miss Kojak because you’re watching Columbo (or vice versa).’ Since Universal made and owned both these television series, Sony’s advertising firm needed the studio’s approval for the use of the titles. Instead, Sony found itself taken to court for copyright violation. Universal was of the opinion that the recording of its intellectual property was tantamount to stealing and that Sony, for manufacturing a machine that made this possible, was liable for all infringements made by Betamax owners and for any losses the studio incurred as a result. As Wasser points out, this claim of financial damage was rather vague, since Betamax was marketed as a device to record from television, and ‘the

economics of American television did not involve direct consumer payment to film producers.’ (Wasser 2010: 2)¹⁶ The case was filed in November of 1976 and dragged on until January 1984, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Sony by a narrow 5-4 majority. By then, however, the case had likely become something of a nuisance, if not an embarrassment, to the plaintiffs,¹⁷ as Hollywood had by and large shed its hostility toward the medium by the beginning of the

¹⁶ Universal was joined in the suit by the Walt Disney Corporation, which, as Lardner, Newman and others have pointed out, feared that video recordings would endanger the company’s strategy of theatrically re-releasing its catalogue of animated films every few years for new generations of children.

¹⁷ Disney had entered the prerecorded video market in 1981 and for distribution it partnered with none other than Sony (Lardner 1988: 268).

1980s, when the release of prerecorded tapes of its movies had proven to be a very profitable revenue stream indeed.¹⁸ As Stephen Prince notes, ‘the industry’s rhetoric about VCR tapeworms belied the economic reality that the majors were exploiting the market they professed to decry.’ (Prince 1999: 102)¹⁹

The “Betamax Case”, as it is commonly referred to, proves that the

¹⁸ By 1980, the home video market brought the American film industry US\$ 280 million in revenue and this number would continue to climb every year for the remainder of the decade (Prince 1999: 92). The most detailed account of the Universal vs. Sony case remains James Lardner’s *Fast Forward: Hollywood, the Japanese, and the VCR Wars* (1988), while Prince (1999: 99-103) offers a useful summary.

¹⁹ The metaphor is a reference to the words of Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), who likened the rapid proliferation of VCRs to an invasion of ‘millions of little tapeworms’ (Prince 1999: 100).

producers of both the technology and the content, at least in an American context, initially viewed the VCR entirely as a time-shifting device. It would take a handful of intrepid small entrepreneurs to show Hollywood that releasing its films on videocassette could be a lucrative business. As Greenberg argues, this transformation of the VCR from a device that records television programs to a device that plays movies was not a physical transformation, since it was already capable of both functions, but a transformation in meaning, ‘involving the construction of new [...] knowledge about what a VCR was good for, as well as the more literal construction of a network of social institutions that would support this new meaning in the consumer marketplace.’ (Greenberg 2008: 5)

It must be noted that the major film studios had good reason to disregard the

possibility of movies on video becoming a viable market. Newman (2014: 30-31) points out that in the late 1960s and early 1970s much of the discourse in American media and industry on video’s future as a consumer item focused on the expectation that the new market would revolve around the retail of videotapes containing prerecorded content and the building of “visual libraries” rather than recording off the air. There had been several attempts in the early 1970s by American parties to launch video devices for home use that could play discs, cartridges, or cassettes with prerecorded content, but none of these proved successful: CBS’s EVR (Electronic Video Recording) and RCA’s SelectaVision were play-only devices that did not allow for making recordings (Newman 2014: 30), while Cartrivision was a video cassette recorder launched in 1972 that was marketed alongside

a line of prerecorded tapes, including a line of “red tapes” featuring Hollywood movies such as *High Noon* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, that were intended for rent only. After a series of marketing failures and engineering mishaps, manufacturer Avco decided to pull out of the project, forcing the machine’s originator Cartridge Television, Inc. to abandon the initiative that same year, in spite of retail support from department store chain Sears, Roebuck and Company.²⁰

Sony had in fact approached a number of Hollywood studios with the intention of forming partnerships for the launch of the Betamax VCR, but, as Greenberg (2008: 50) notes, the studios were unwilling to gamble on

²⁰ For more detailed accounts of the Cartrivision venture, see Lardner 1988: 76-84; Wasko 1994: 118-119; Greenberg 2008: 48-49.

a new device if it didn’t offer strict control over how its users would watch films.²¹ Where Hollywood feared to tread, others with less at stake and a clearer view of the opportunities were willing to take the plunge. Collectors of film prints banded together to release titles that they considered, erroneously or not, to be in the public domain, which they transferred onto videotape from their own collections and sold by mail order. The pornography industry too embraced video almost from the get-go, and was so prolific that for the remainder of the 1970s, pornography made up half of all the sales of prerecorded tapes in the United States

²¹ The Cartrivision rental tapes supplied such control: they could only be rewound by a special device in possession of the retailer, which meant that consumers could rent a film for a single viewing only. Lardner and Greenberg both argue that this scheme contributed to the format’s lack of appeal to consumers and eventual commercial failure.

(Wasser 2002: 94). Greenberg (2008: 52) suggests that adult film's existence on the fringes of American society and the entertainment business made this particular industry more free to try out new ventures, though the suitability of adult movies to a circumstance of private viewing makes the early link between pornography and the VCR seem an obvious one.²²

The person most often credited with starting off the market for movies on video, however, is Andre Blay, who in the mid-1970s was the owner of Magnetic Video, a Michigan-based audiovisual production and duplication house that made corporate training videos and

²² Greenberg and Newman both note how this trend also figures into the VCR as 'masculinized medium' (Newman 2014: 42), including its early appeal to tech-fetish hobbyists and collectors.

reproduced audiocassettes and 8-track tapes.²³ After learning about the Sony Betamax recorder, he sent a letter to various Hollywood studios enquiring about licensing their titles for release on home video. Only Twentieth Century Fox replied, positively, offering him one hundred titles, all at least five years old, at US\$ 5,000 each.²⁴ Since the initial funds he had available for the investment were limited, Blay proposed licensing fifty titles at US\$ 6,000 each and the two parties reached an

²³ Blay's story is recounted in virtually every work dealing with the history of home video, academic (Wasser 2002: 95-98; Greenberg 2008: 52-57; Herbert 2014: 23-24) and otherwise (Lardner 1988: 163-170; the feature documentary *Rewind This!*, dir: Josh Johnson, 2013), and has by now virtually reached canonical status.

²⁴ Twentieth Century Fox had already shown itself open to releasing its films on video during the development of CBS's EVR system. See Lardner 1988: 72.

agreement in July of 1977. In selecting his fifty titles, Blay crosschecked the list of titles supplied by Twentieth Century Fox with *Variety's* list of highest-grossing films of all time, and chose the top fifty.²⁵

Magnetic Video released its tapes for sale only. The agreement with Twentieth Century Fox forbade rental, a clause that Blay subsequently worked into his contracts with retailers. Wasser details how Magnetic Video set the retail price of each cassette, between US\$50 and 70, partially based on the pricing of film prints and on the logic that someone who wanted the option of watching a film again and

²⁵ When the scheme proved successful, Blay also made various deals with smaller companies, including an eight-year exclusive agreement to distribute a large part of the Charlie Chaplin library, as well as for ninety-one titles owned by Avco-Embassy, including *The Graduate*.

again should pay accordingly.²⁶ Magnetic Video marketed its videotapes in two ways: in a two-step process via wholesalers to retailers (wholesalers had to make a minimum order of US\$ 8,000 worth of tapes, which they then sold individually or as packages to retailers); and via mail order directly to individual customers who joined a scheme called the Video Club of America for a US\$ 10 fee. In spite of the relatively high price per cassette, 'Magnetic Video was selling as fast as it could manufacture the tapes' (Wasser 2002: 98). Within weeks, the Video Club of America had over 12,000 members. By 1980, it had 60,000. By then, however, Twentieth Century Fox had

²⁶ As a useful comparison, Wasser mentions that the average price for a cinema ticket in 1977 was US\$ 2.23 (Wasser 2002: 97). Also, bootleg copies of Hollywood films could fetch as high as US\$ 200 or more per tape at the time (Newman 2014: 38).

bought Magnetic Video outright and appointed Blay to head its new home video division.

As Wasser (2002: 151) points out, Twentieth Century Fox placed the entire risk of developing a market for movies on prerecorded videotapes on the shoulders of Andre Blay's Magnetic Video. Other Hollywood studios used the uncertainty induced by the "format war" between VHS and Betamax as an excuse to postpone entering this new market (Magnetic Video released its titles in both formats).²⁷ In Japan, on the other hand, the film industry took a leading role in developing a market for prerecorded videocassettes: Toho founded its video division as early as 1969,

²⁷ For more on the format war and the reasons for VHS's eventual dominance in the market, see: Lardner 1988: 151-162; Wasko 1994: 122; Wasser 2002: 72-75; Greenberg 2008: 3-4.

followed by Toei Video in 1970, and Nikkatsu around the same time, though operating through its sound recordings division. Also in 1970, these companies and various other ventures²⁸ hoping to capitalize on the emerging video market joined forces to form the Japan Video Association (Nihon Bideo Kyōkai, or JVA). (Zahlten 2007: 328)

²⁸ Zahlten mentions Fuji Pony, a joint venture between three broadcasting corporations – Fuji TV, Nippon Hōsō and Nippon Hōsō affiliate Pony – expressly founded as a video distribution company. Fuji Pony's first set of 17 releases included 'educational tapes on ballet, golf, bowling, a documentary on the Sahara and two anime tapes produced by Tezuka Osamu's Mushi Production, episodes of *Astroboy (Tetsuwan atomu)* and *Kimba the White Lion (Janguru taitel)*' as well as several sexually themed titles (Zahlten 2007: 328-329). Nearly all tapes were '30 minutes in length and priced at 30,000 Yen (\$83)' (Zahlten 2007: 489).

The Japanese market for prerecorded video content was at this early stage still rather limited and clearly defined: educational institutions formed the largest segment, with educational videos for businesses and to a lesser extent for individuals following suit. Other markets included ships, as well as love hotels, to which the Nikkatsu studio catered with not only its in-house “Roman Porno” softcore productions, but also titles licensed from specialist pink film production companies. As early as by the summer of 1970, some 2,500 love hotels had video machines installed for use by customers (Zahlten 2007: 328).²⁹ Kinema Junpō magazine published a special issue devoted to the video business in 1971, entitled *Videopia* (*Bideopia Kinema Junpō*

²⁹ On love hotels, see: Sarah Chaplin, *Japanese Love Hotels: A Cultural History* (2007).

Bessatsu), which concluded that the primary interest and product of the video market at this time was pink films. In an attempt to crack down on sexually themed material, police took action against Toei Video in 1971 and against Nikkatsu, both video and theatrical, in 1972, to which the industry responded by setting up the Adult Video Regulations Autonomous Round Table (Seijin Bideo Jishu Kisei Kodankai) in 1972, a predecessor to the video self-regulation body Biderin (Nippon Bideo Rinri Kyōkai, a.k.a. Nihon Ethics of Video Association (NEVA)). (Zahlten 2007: 329)

The same contrast between the situations in the U.S. and Japan reoccurs when it comes to the creation of the video rental market. In the United States, as Greenberg argues, ‘Magnetic Video wasn’t just selling tapes to people who already owned VCRs, they were also selling the very *idea* of movies

on videotape as a reason to buy a VCR in the first place.’ (Greenberg 2008: 54) However, this idea was not so much sold to people as rented to them: Magnetic Video and Twentieth Century Fox may have done all they legally could to prevent anyone in the distribution chain from making their releases available for rent, but it was those outside the official channels that once again took the initiative. As Herbert puts it, ‘the rental model was developed [in the United States] in an almost grassroots, populist manner.’ (Herbert 2014: 24) Speculation about who was first aside, it is clear that a handful of entrepreneurs around the country came up with the idea of renting out videocassettes when they heard about Magnetic Video’s first batch of releases during the latter half of 1977. George Atkinson, owner

of a film rental business in Los Angeles,³⁰ Erol Oranan, an electronics dealer in Washington, D.C.,³¹ Dennis Thomas, Jim Olenski, and Gary Reichel, who ran a store selling Super 8 film reels in Royal Oak, Michigan³² – all have been named among the first to start renting out videotapes. They all acquired the first fifty Magnetic Video titles as individual customers, rather than as officially affiliated wholesalers or retailers, and applied the “first sale doctrine”: a provision in U.S. copyright law that allows the owner of the physical manifestation of a copyrighted work, in this case a videocassette, to do with this object as they please, provided they do not copy it. This included putting it up

³⁰ Lardner 1988: 170-175; Wasser 2002: 98; Greenberg 2008: 65-66.

³¹ Gomery 1992: 280-281; Wasser 2002: 98.

³² Herbert 24-25

for rent, without the obligation to give the copyright owner a percentage of the proceeds.

While the three pioneering examples mentioned above were people whose businesses carried in nature at least an affinity with the idea of movies on video, subsequent retailers came from a wide variety of backgrounds, including photo development chains, record stores, grocery stores, and truck and trailer rental services (Greenberg 2008: 68-72). Each of these framed home video through their own business expertise and experience, but gradually, with the help of videotape distributors 'who acted as knowledge brokers and helped shape a shared consensus on how to market and sell movies on videocassette' (Greenberg 2008: 14), the image of videotape shifted away from being a technological accessory sold alongside VCRs in brown goods stores to becoming seen as an

extension of the movie theater experience that was rented at the video store. With this consensus in place and profitability proven, a 'gold rush' (Williams 2005: 254; Greenberg 2008: 72) ensued and the number of video stores across the country literally rose exponentially, from 2,500 in 1980 to 25,000 in 1986.

In Japan the video rental store was, like the home video market as a whole, an industry-led venture. In July 1977, the same month that Andre Blay signed his agreement with Twentieth Century Fox, the Toho Video Shop opened in Tokyo's Ginza district. Launched as a pilot project with the aim of providing a testing ground for the members of the Japan Video Association, the store's management was run by Toho and located in the basement of Toho's flagship cinema, the

Nichigeki Theater (Tanioka 2002: 38).³³ More or less concurrently, a repertory cinema in Nagoya called the Endōji Theater opened a video rental service, the Nagoya Video Library (Nagoya Bideo Toshokan), where cassettes could either be taken home or watched on the premises (Zahlten 2007: 331). In spite of the gestational differences between the American and Japanese models, the reason for setting up a rental service appears to have been quite similar: retail prices of videocassettes were high enough to deter anyone but the most enthusiastic and determined cinephiles and collectors, while most others were not inclined to watch a film much more than once. Official retail prices for a videocassette containing a

³³ The experimental nature of the Toho Video Shop is further underlined by the fact that the Nichigeki Theater closed down not long after, in 1981.

90-120 minute feature film in Japan in the late 1970s hovered around the 60,000-yen mark, or US\$ 226 (Nakamura 1996, quoted in Zahlten 2007: 490).³⁴ Rental fees reflected the steeper pricing of cassettes in Japan. The Toho Video Shop charged 1,000 Yen (US\$ 3.77) for a 20-minute tape and 3,000 Yen (US\$ 11.32) for a tape running 90 minutes or over, for a four-day rental period. By opening their pilot video store in Ginza, a district known for its upscale shopping, the members of the Japan Video Association were consciously framing video rental as a luxury commodity, its pricing scheme quite disconnected from the cost of watching a film at the cinema: the average

³⁴ Zahlten notes the caveat that, due to for example package deals and various discounts, videotapes were rarely sold to video rental stores at the listed price (Zahlten 2007: 331, 490).

ticket price at a movie theater in Tokyo in 1980 was 1,300 Yen (US\$ 4.81).³⁵ Rental fees in the United States, by contrast, where video rental was arguably developed as a form of resistance against Hollywood corporate policy, were only slightly higher than the price of a cinema ticket, very rapidly dropping from an average US\$ 7 for a feature-length movie in 1980 to less than US\$ 3 three years later (Wasser 2002: 101).

Both the U.S. and the Japanese models of the video rental store adhere to Greenberg's notion of a "consumption junction." He adapts the term from Ruth Cowan, who used it to refer to abstract cultural spaces in which consumers interact with

³⁵ <http://www.gabagenews.net/archives/1190939.html> [accessed August 30, 2016]

producers,³⁶ into a term that refers to an actual physical and cultural space with a geography and norms that are 'manifestations of an underlying technological frame' (Greenberg 2008: 63). Wasser later adopts the term as well, calling the video rental store a 'classic example' of such a space, 'where consumers, manufacturers, marketers and other social forces finally determine the significance of a new technological apparatus, often without much conscious intention.' (Wasser 2010: 2) While this final stipulation holds true for the American situation more than for the Japanese model, the early deliberate experiment of the Toho Video Shop was nevertheless intended

³⁶ Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1987), 'The Consumption Junction: A Proposal for Research Strategies in the Sociology of Technology', in Trevor Pinch, Wiebe Bijker and Thomas Hughes (eds.), *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987

to gather data on the rental preferences of consumers, thereby making the latter a significant party in the development of the rental store model.³⁷

In this regard, the early Japanese situation shows an interesting dichotomy in this process of making meaning. In both Tokyo and Nagoya the video stores were spatially connected to a film theater,³⁸ yet these

³⁷ Herbert reveals a U.S.-centered perspective when he writes that 'video stores appealed to Americans' sense of individuality by offering multiple viewing options' (Herbert 2014: 29). This was of course inherent in the video store's genre- and audience-based spatial organization, independent of what country it was in. Individual tastes were the very point of setting up the Toho Video Shop, which was *intended* for gathering data on diverging customer preferences.

³⁸ American video stores only gradually developed a (symbolic) connection to the movie theater, by way of allusion rather than location: for example by putting

pioneering locations developed 'two distinct strains of discourse' (Zahlten 2007: 332). At the Toho Video Shop in Ginza, the emphasis was on video as a fashionable high-tech commodity, which was achieved through pricing and through the store's location in a high-end shopping district. The image of the space in Nagoya was, as Zahlten points out, working-class and segregated from its surroundings, due to the fact that the Endōji Theater was a *meigaza*, a repertory cinema specializing in erotic pink films and yakuza films that attracted a specific type of audience, of which the in-house video rental store became a reflection. This contrast between the

marquee lights on store signs or by selling popcorn, thus emphasizing that customers were not buying the physical objects called videocassettes but were renting movies. For more on this particular development in the spatial design of American video stores, see Greenberg 2008: 81-84.

two locations is not immediately apparent in client demographics: 93% of the clientele at the Toho Video Shop consisted of males; at the Nagoya Video Library 99% of the customers were male. However, the higher percentage at Nagoya was almost certainly a reflection of the Endōji's existing customer base as a male-designated screening space. As Zahlten (2007: 332) concludes, video, whether as a technology or as a medium for movies, was 'obviously positioned as a male domain' across the two locations. For all the differences between the situations in Japan and in the United States, video was in both cases a 'masculinized medium'. Emphasizing the function of these video rental pioneers as consumption junctions, such statistics would have a profound influence on the development of the rental market in Japan. The Toho Video Shop was short-lived and not particularly well

attended (Zahlten notes that the average number of rentals were only two tapes per day during much of the store's brief lifespan (2007: 330)), yet it proved a valuable source of data for the interested parties. The Nagoya Video Library³⁹ also served a useful function for distributors when rental video was adopted as a systematic business model: 'representatives of Biderin, Warner (the first in Japan to begin selling tapes expressly for rental), and Pony Canyon all visited the [Nagoya Video Library] to inquire about their experiences with video rental, and used the information to form their future business strategies' (Zahlten 2007: 332). The data thus gathered proved so influential that even toward the end the 1980s, the Toei V-Cinema production and distribution model would be consciously geared at a male

³⁹ The Nagoya Video Library closed its doors in 2005.

audience, through choice of genres, storylines, casting, and promotional materials including product packaging. This was not only a question of relying on past data, however: according to the JVA, even in 1993 men still made up 70% of all video rental store memberships in Japan (Zahlten 2007: 332).⁴⁰

In spite of the different lines along which the American and the Japanese home video markets developed, some similarities existed that in time assured that these two systems resulted in very similar models of a nationwide network of video rental stores. This network gave the established film industries in both territories an additional revenue stream that would equal and even surpass income

⁴⁰ Cazdyn (2002: 173) gives the example of a Tokyo video store whose customer base, in 1996, was more than 75% male.

from traditional theatrical exhibition. Furthermore, video rental would also offer opportunities to smaller outfits for film production and distribution, notably those that bypassed the theatrical exhibition circuit and instead premiered their titles directly on video rental store shelves.

II - 'The Lowest Discursive Status': Direct-to-video Production and Distribution in the U.S.A.

In 1984, a year that perhaps not coincidentally opened with the U.S. Supreme Court's liberating judgment in the Betamax case, home video experienced its first 'billion-dollar year' (Alvarado 1988: 137) in terms of sales of prerecorded cassettes in the United States: US\$ 1.4 billion (Wasser 2002: 119), corresponding with 21.1 million units (Prince

1999: 95).⁴¹ Alvarado (1988: 151) notes that this period marked the start of a 'second wave' of VCR ownership: many of those who, for some reason or other, had put off acquiring a video device were now taking the plunge. The number of American households in possession of a VCR rose from 8.3 million in 1983 to 32.5 million in 1986, and would continue to increase over the remainder of the decade, to 62.3 million in 1989 (Prince 1999: 96).⁴²

A May 1984 Nielsen HomeVideo Index survey found that 57 percent of the respondents who had owned a VCR for less than a year indicated that 'the availability of

prerecorded tapes was an important factor in their decision to purchase a video-cassette recorder' (Harmetz 1984). Prince (1999: 97) supplies revealing statistics on the growth of the video rental market during this period: in 1985, more than half of all VCR households were renting an average of four videotapes per month, and by 1987, the average weekly number of rentals per American video store stood at 1,258 tapes.

As Lobato (2012: 22) notes, this rapid take-up of the VCR as a medium for movies resulted in a serious shortage of content. The Hollywood studios had largely refrained from releasing their titles on video until the early 1980s, and then had to play catch-up. This left a gap for smaller independent companies to establish themselves. Prince quotes Ira Deutchman, who in 1982 was the co-founder of Cinecom, a distribution company

⁴¹ More than half of this amount went to independent film companies (Wasser 2012: 119).

⁴² The number of VCRs sold per year during this period are: 1984: 7.6 million; 1985: 11.3 million; 1986: 12 million. (Prince 1999: 95)

specializing in American independent films, and from 1990 the president of Fine Line Pictures (a division of New Line Cinema):

‘Perhaps the biggest boon that has ever occurred in the independent sector was the explosion of home video in the early eighties. It was a voracious market for anything with sprocket holes, and even the major studios couldn’t provide enough product to satisfy the demand. All of a sudden there was enormous capital available to independent theatrical distributors as advances against home video rights. Not only was all this money being used to acquire films, it also fueled the entrance of many independents into production.’
(Prince 1999: 117)

With videocassette sales between 1983 and 1989 surging from 11.1 million to 207.5 million,⁴³ film distributors could, as Prince (1999: 118) notes, acquire lines of credit against ancillary revenues,⁴⁴ which created an influx of capital that supported the emergence of new film production and distribution firms – as well as new production and distribution

⁴³ This is without considering revenues from licensing video rights to foreign territories: ‘Videocassettes sales, for example, generated \$6.8 billion in top foreign markets in 1988. The most profitable territories that year were the United Kingdom (\$920 million in sales). Germany (\$829 million), Japan (\$751 million), and Canada (\$480 million).’ (Prince 1999: 98)

⁴⁴ Though it is still a common film industry term even today, it has been ‘technically incorrect to call [video] an ancillary format’ (Benson-Allott 2013: 13) ever since revenue from home video overtook income from theatrical distribution in 1986.

forms. As early as 1983, Andre Blay, then the head of Embassy Home Entertainment, observed that the next logical step in the development of the prerecorded video market was the creation of films expressly for release on home video: '[T]he seven major studios only produce 100 films a year and independent movie makers produce another 100. And most studios have exhausted their catalogues of old movies. Making shows for videocassettes is going to be a whole new ball game.' (Harmetz 1983)

Direct-to-video (DTV, also often referred to as straight-to-video or STV) production and distribution was a response to the supply shortage and the high demand for content in rental video that existed in the United States during the latter half of the 1980s. Between 1983 and 1988, U.S. film production rose from 350 titles per year to 600

(Lobato 2012: 22). Lobato notes that at least part of this increased demand and production was due to the proliferation of cable television, which took off around the same time as home video, as well as the deregulation of broadcasting in Europe, Asia, and Latin America: 'As formerly state-run stations were commercialized and/or privatised, the demand for "average or below-average American films" increased exponentially and a new market niche was born.' (Lobato 2012: 23) Gomery mentions that 'uncut, uncensored, uninterrupted screenings of feature films' were the main factor in the success of cable and pay-per-view (Gomery 1992: 275), and Linda Ruth Williams emphasizes that often there is little to distinguish made-for-TV and DTV, and that the same films turned up on various platforms, though sometimes in different versions: '[t]he same film might be shot with

scenes which can be included or cut depending on the target audience, released in one version for terrestrial television, a more explicit version for cable television, and different cuts might then be released on video or DVD.’ (Williams 2005: 286)

In light of developments outlined above, Wasser’s claim that ‘video rental did not uncover a large audience who were willing to support alternative moviemaking’ (Wasser 2010: 6) sounds off the mark if we approach ‘alternative moviemaking’ not from the perspective of the text (i.e. as an aesthetic criterion), but as an issue of production and distribution. Williams (2005: 249) emphasizes that we must differentiate between an independent film company and a company making ‘indie-looking’ films: the latter, the ‘hip indie companies [...] making offbeat or “smart” movies’, were absorbed into the Hollywood

major studio systems through various corporate takeovers during the 1990s, whereas many B-movie production houses remained truly independent. As Lobato points out, ‘[h]ome video is not just a stage in the value chain through which Hollywood product passes. It has produced its own specific distribution model, which in turn has given rise to whole new production infrastructures, aesthetic forms, genres and consumption practices.’ (Lobato 2012: 36)

The ventures of amateur filmmaker Richard Pepin and Syrian émigré and pizzeria owner Joseph Merhi are an example of the new independent production outfits that were created to meet this increased demand. The pair made their self-financed first film in 1986, shortly after arriving in Los Angeles from their previous home base Las Vegas: a comedy

called *Hollywood in Trouble*, directed by Merhi and produced by Pepin.

[Merhi] could just not sell that movie. The problem was that it was a comedy and nobody was interested in comedies, but they all said, “If you make an action film, we’d be interested.” They caught just the beginning of the wave. At the time, VCRs were pretty new and there were video stores on every corner. Companies were starved for content, and the content they wanted was action.’ (Yanick 2016)

This specific market demand motivated Pepin and Merhi to switch to the action genre for their next production, *Mayhem*, made later that same year under the banner of City Lights, the production company they founded with Ronald

Gilchrist. After three years of directing and producing mostly action films, Pepin and Merhi parted ways with Gilchrist, who also took the rights to the company’s catalogue with him. Stripped of ownership of the films they had made, Pepin and Merhi set up the new venture PM Entertainment in 1989 and moved ahead with producing more action films, at an average pace of eight new titles per year. Between 1989 and 2000, the year Pepin and Merhi sold the company, PM Entertainment produced a total of 87 feature films, at production budgets that ranged from US\$ 350,000 per film in its early years to US\$ 2 million by the late 1990s (Yanick 2016) – budgets that paid for action scenes, stunts, and, in later years, the casting of Hollywood character actors or fallen former A-listers, including Roy Scheider, Michael Madsen, and C. Thomas Howell.

This latter point, the different mobilities of the actors that appear in DTV movies, is one of the characteristics Lobato identifies when he offers something close to a model of DTV production and distribution. He notes that DTV has its own star system, 'which cross-pollinates with the Hollywood A-list as well as with modeling, tabloid culture, the music industry, wrestling, bodybuilding and sports', and which makes the DTV sector 'both a breeding and a dumping ground' (Lobato 2012: 25) While some actors, like Madsen, Dennis Hopper, or Dennis Farina, seemed to move in and out of DTV with relative ease, erstwhile Hollywood leading men such as Howell, Peter Weller, and Steven Seagal appear to have gotten stuck there 'on the way down' (Williams 2005: 295, Lobato 2012: 25).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Like a number of other DTV stars, such as Dolph

As per the example of PM Entertainment mentioned above, Lobato identifies DTV as being the realm of mostly independent producers and distributors,⁴⁶ working on 'a flexible model of dispersed, small-scale production and ad hoc distribution'

Lundgren, Howell went on to direct DTV movies. For a more detailed examination of casting strategies in DTV, see Williams 2005: 294-304.

⁴⁶ As Lobato also notes, DTV is not exclusively the realm of independents. Disney, for example, has released numerous sequels to and spin-offs of its theatrical successes directly on video, such as *The Return of Jafar* (1994) and *The Lion King II: Simba's Pride* (1998). Other examples of DTV sequel-franchises to Hollywood theatrical productions include the follow-ups to *American Pie*, *Universal Soldier*, and *From Dusk till Dawn*. As David Church contends, this phenomenon demonstrates 'the contemporary truism that a theatrical release merely serves as an expensive advertisement for a film's considerably larger profitability on home video'. (Church 2014: 283)

(23). These DTV producers specialize in giving audiences ‘what they already know they like (and nothing more)’ (25): ‘low budget films designed to play well in overseas markets [...] faithful contributions to established exploitation sub-genres with global “playability”, such as the vampire film, the martial arts film and the humans-as-prey film’ (30),⁴⁷ which can ‘fit easily into one particular section of the video store’ (25) and which feature the required number of ‘explosions, car chases and topless girls’ (32). As ‘a cultural form based on the pleasures of mediocrity’ (34), the DTV industry

⁴⁷ Other representative subgenres in American DTV are the cop-on-the-edge movie, the erotic thriller, and the mockbuster. The latter is a more recent development (see Potts 2007; Church 2014: 280-281), which thrives on intentionally confusing its audience with titles that sound similar to Hollywood blockbuster releases, such *Transmorphers* or *The Da Vinci Treasure*.

generates thousands of new movies per year following the above pattern; on a world-wide scale, ‘[i]n terms of the number of films released each year, straight-to-video is the empirical norm of contemporary cinema.’ (22)

More important for an approach of direct-to-video production and distribution from a framework of canonization, Lobato emphasizes that DTV possesses ‘the lowest discursive status of any kind of film, being ineligible for Oscar nominations and for most other markers of institutional recognition.’ (Lobato 2012: 33) Rather than some form of stigmatizing injustice, this fate is inherent in the methods and models of DTV releasing, a sort of planned obscurity: DTV ‘quite literally treats the film as a cut-price commodity, something to be bought and sold and watched and forgotten.’ (Lobato 2012: 34) What little exists in terms of discourse on DTV is in itself

obscure and largely limited, as Linda Ruth Williams notes, to the kind of ironic celebrations of bad cinema that Jeffrey Sconce identifies as paracinema (Sconce 1995). Most of this happens in online channels where a few dedicated aficionados compile and compare lists of their favorite films and stars,⁴⁸ although

⁴⁸ “Vulgar auteurism” was a slightly more ambitious yet brief trend (the majority of articles turned up by a Google search for “vulgar auteurism” date from 2013) among a number of online film critics and bloggers, which tried to find value in DTV in the very space where Lobato denies its existence: the text. But while vulgar auteurism attempted to dust off the Sarris rulebook by way of U.S. critic J. Hoberman’s notion of “vulgar modernism,” the participants’ celebration of ‘great directors of direct-to-video action’ (Erickson 2013) in the end merely reiterated Lobato’s point by marveling over a handful of exceptions that proved the rule: individual titles, rather than bodies of work, that the writers felt were actually possessing of artistic merit despite being DTV. Like the books by Tasker

one higher-profile platform is the monthly “Video Dungeon” column in British film magazine *Empire*, written by British author and film critic Kim Newman.⁴⁹ While the aforementioned video scholars tend to focus on Hollywood product, DTV has not gone entirely unnoticed in academic discourse, as there are three noteworthy texts that deal with genres characteristic of DTV: Yvonne Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (1993), James Naremore’s *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (1998), and Linda Ruth Williams’ *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (2005), all of which touch upon the DTV arena to a greater

and Williams, “vulgar auteurism” did not limit itself to DTV productions but also included theatrically released features in its attempts at forming a canon.

⁴⁹ Newman’s collected ‘Video Dungeon’ columns appeared in book form in 2017.

or lesser extent: Tasker, despite covering the work of such stalwart direct-to-video stars as Jean-Claude Van Damme and Cynthia Rothrock, limits herself for the most part to begrudging acknowledgement of DTV's existence, apparently at odds with 'my desire to eulogise the cinematic qualities of the genre' (Tasker 1993: 7); Naremore covers the erotic thriller within the context of the development of film noir and notes the influence of DTV productions on Hollywood filmmaking and distribution practices; Williams, the most encompassing of the three, devotes four chapters to DTV and emphasizes the impact of the home viewing context of rental video on viewing patterns and film form, as embodied in the direct-to-video erotic thriller, and how these issues have remained neglected in academic discourse due to the genre's lowbrow nature.

Williams, like Lobato, identifies the B-movie and exploitation traditions of American filmmaking as DTV's closest kin (Williams 2005: 284; Lobato 2012: 23). Lobato goes one step further by drawing a direct genealogy, arguing that developments in Hollywood cinema such as the relaxing of censorship rules regarding swearing, violence, and sexuality, plus the "blockbuster" success of such films as *Jaws* (released by Universal) and *Star Wars* (released by Twentieth Century Fox) – essentially B-movie genres made on A-movie budgets⁵⁰ – put the makers of low-budget

⁵⁰ Though this is often represented as a transition unique to this period (and *Jaws* has even been described as little more than a 'big-budget Roger Corman movie' (Nasr 2011: 206)), monster movies and fantasy films had been mainstays of Hollywood cinema for decades; see for example *King Kong* from 1933 or, even earlier, the silent film *The Lost World* from 1925.

exploitation films at a disadvantage in the theatrical circuit.

‘It’s very difficult to get somebody to spend five dollars or six dollars a ticket to see a one-hundred-thousand-dollar, or even a million-dollar film, when they can wait and see it on television for nothing, or for the same five dollars they can see a twenty-million dollar film, or for one or two dollars a night they can rent a videocassette. The economics are working against low-budget films’.

(Roger Corman speaking in 1986, quoted in Nasr 2011: 144)

This disadvantage was due not only to the much higher production budgets the Hollywood

majors had at their disposal,⁵¹ but also their correspondingly elevated marketing budgets, which were aimed at drawing a maximum number of punters into theaters on opening weekend. DTV would solve this insurmountable difference in scale by largely foregoing marketing hype altogether: they

⁵¹ This scenario would replay itself in the 1990s, when DTV ‘became a seventeen-billion-dollar-a-year industry, involving more money than all the major studios combined’ (Naremore 1998: 161) and Hollywood studios started making films for the same market. Examples include a number of films starring Dolph Lundgren, such as *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991, co-produced by Warner Bros.), *Joshua Tree*, a.k.a. *Army of One* (1993, released in some territories by Twentieth Century Fox), and *The Shooter*, a.k.a. *Hidden Assassin* (1995, released by Buena Vista Home Entertainment). Yanick (2016) cites competition due to the higher budgets of these Hollywood-funded DTVs as a reason for the retirement of PM Entertainment’s Richard Pepin and Joseph Merhi from DTV filmmaking in 2000.

attract customers within the consumption junction of the video store, mainly on the basis of video-box art and through in-store advertising such as posters and trailers (Naremore 1998: 161; Corman quoted in Kurutz 2010) – hence the need for the films to, as Lobato notes, fit easily into a certain section of the video store, which makes them easier to find for browsers.⁵² A token limited theatrical release can additionally work as a form of advertising for the video release, as it ‘gives the film a bit more clout in the stores, overseas or in the cable markets’ (Naremore 1998: 165).

The ‘residual forms of exploitation cinema’ (Lobato 2012: 24) that could not move into the Hollywood filmmaking circuit in the age of the blockbuster had to look elsewhere and in

⁵² For more on the role of browsing in the social space of the video store, see Herbert 2014: 67-72.

many cases they ended up in DTV. One key example, also identified by Lobato, is Roger Corman, prolific director and producer of exploitation films for theaters and drive-ins since the mid-1950s. After working as a freelancer for such independent exploitation film companies as American International Pictures and Allied Artists, Corman founded New World Pictures in 1970, where he would produce the debut works of such filmmakers as Martin Scorsese, James Cameron, Ron Howard, and Jonathan Demme, all of whom would go on to win the Academy Award for Best Director for later work in Hollywood. Corman sold the company, including the video rights to its catalogue, in 1983. By 1985, the year total U.S. videocassette sales reached 45.9 million units (Prince 1999: 95), its subsidiary New World Video alone was reporting earnings of US\$ 41 million, almost

equal to the entire company's gross income the previous year (Alvarado 1988: 137). Similar to the later founding of PM Entertainment as described above, being left without a library of titles at a moment when demand from the home video market soared, Corman founded New Horizons (from 1989: Concorde-New Horizons; from 1995: New Concorde) soon after selling New World Pictures, in order to resume production on new films. With New Horizons Corman focused almost exclusively on the DTV market and this phase in his career delivers a confirmation of Lobato's claim about DTV's low discursive status, as well of Williams' claim that 'the DTV film is more drive-in B-fodder than auteur work' (Williams 2005: 258).⁵³ Corman had long held a reputation for

⁵³ Corman himself, as a director often considered an auteur, took a hiatus from directing when he founded New

nursing the careers of filmmakers that would quickly graduate into the upper echelons of Hollywood: even before founding New World Pictures, he had given first directorial assignments to the likes of Francis Ford Coppola, Irvin Kershner, Monte Hellman, and Peter Bogdanovich. The number of such breakthroughs of Corman protégés, however, dwindled to almost zero from the moment Corman turned his attention to DTV, in spite of the fact that Concorde-New Horizons, according to Corman, 'made more English-language features than any other company in the world, including all of the majors' between

World Pictures, which he extended well beyond the establishment of New Horizons: he would direct only one more film, *Roger Corman's Frankenstein Unbound*, in 1990, not for his own company but for Twentieth Century Fox. Corman received an Honorary Academy Award in 2009.

1987 and 1990 (quoted in Nasr 2011: 165). Instead of going on to win Oscars, the directors Corman worked with since the founding of New Horizons have by and large remained where they began: directing “mediocre pleasures” for the direct-to-video market.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The arrival of home video in the mid-1970s, with the introduction of Sony’s Betamax

⁵⁴ The one exception would be Kazakh-born filmmaker Timur Bekmambetov, who directed *The Arena* for Concorde-New Horizons in 2001. He would go on to direct and produce several Hollywood action films, including 2008’s *Wanted* starring Angelina Jolie, though this was arguably due more to the commercially successful films he made in Russia in the intervening years, in particular the vampire films *Night Watch* (*Nochnoy dozor*, 2004) and *Day Watch* (*Dnevnoy dozor*, 2006), both of which received wide international theatrical distribution, including in the U.S.A.

videocassette recorder, was met with outright hostility by the Hollywood film industry as well as by academic film studies in the U.S. Yet this new technology overcame such antagonism through the sheer overwhelming force of its popularity, particularly as a medium for movies in the form of videotape rental – an interpretation of the device and its potential that manufacturers of hardware and software had not initially intended. The Hollywood film industry joined the fray in the early years of 1980s and by 1986 video was bringing them more money than theatrical exhibition. Video studies properly arrived post-2000, with a new generation of scholars that had grown up in VCR-equipped homes, thus ending the stigma of inferiority with which previous academics had burdened this medium. However, a focus on video as a means of distribution for Hollywood product has left obscure new

medium-specific forms of feature film production and distribution, in particular direct-to-video releasing, which has remained largely ignored for failing to meet the artistic standards applied, consciously or otherwise, in the academic study of film. Despite clearly qualifying as such within the American media landscape, DTV was not given the marker of “independent” or “alternative” cinema, which had become terms of artistic distinction coopted by the ‘indie-looking’ films that qualified for the institutional recognition of festivals and awards.

In Japan, the development of a consumer market for home video was instigated by the established film industry, allowing for the early formation of a paradigm of video rental thanks to active research into early prototypes of the video rental store. Though evolutions in the home video market in

the U.S.A. largely took place in the independent sector, a different model of development did not prevent a very similar market and network of video rental stores from gaining shape in Japan around roughly the same time. Japan too developed medium-specific forms of feature film production and distribution, and it is now time to turn our attention to the Japanese equivalent of DTV, generally referred to as V-Cinema, which in many ways adheres to the model described by Lobato, yet at the same time diverges from it in several very significant respects, particularly when regarded within the framework of discourse and canonization: initiated by a major film studio, V-Cinema would build a legacy as breeding ground for new talent that is much closer to that of Roger Corman’s New World Pictures than to the insular arena of American DTV.