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

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4. V-Cinema: A Domestic Model in Transnational Context

One factor that goes a long way toward explaining why the established film industry in Japan was so quick and so eager to explore and cultivate the content side of the video market is the country's 'economic miracle' (Alexander 2008: 14) of the 1960s and '70s. The importance of this factor only increased as the 1980s dawned: as Jonathan Clements points out, the development of the home video market occurred during a boom time for the Japanese economy and amid the increasing availability of investment capital (Clements 2013: 157). This stands in stark contrast to the situation in the U.S., whose economy was in a recession at the time (Rushefsky 2013: 62), therefore providing little stimulus for the major film studios to gamble on the new medium and explore the uncertain potential of a future market. They left these tasks to a handful of intrepid independents instead.

The data gathered during the four-year trial period of the Toho Video Shop in Tokyo may have proved influential, but with the low overall number of rentals – an average two per day for much of the store's existence – it was hardly conclusive. The years following the shop's closure in 1981 have been described as an 'age of confusion (*konmei no jidai*)' (Misono 1999, quoted in Clements 2013: 160), during which 'there was no clear consensus among producers and investors as to how video might be best exploited commercially, leading to chaotic experiments in content' (Clements 2013: 160). One such experiment was the Nikkatsu studio's "Raw Take" (*Namadori*) series of 30-minute erotic works released directly onto video, starting from 1981. From

1982 through 1984, publishing company Kadokawa attempted to simultaneously release films in theaters and on video, both on the same day. The Kadokawa conglomerate encompassed both a publishing arm and a film production / distribution section. The latter began a successful run of film releases – often based on bestsellers from its publishing division – from the second half of the 1970s, using production and distribution methods modeled on Hollywood practices of the blockbuster age. Kadokawa intentionally positioned itself as breaking with existing models of film making and releasing in Japan, which explains its eagerness to experiment with video, such as doing away with the temporal sequence of film releasing that implies a hierarchy of status, in which theatrical exhibition always precedes the video release.

Another of such 'unpredictable disruptions' (Clements 2013: 160) occurred in the animation industry, which somewhat haphazardly turned to direct-to-video releasing around the same time as Kadokawa's experiments with multiplatform releasing. "Original Video Animation" or OVA (also rendered as OAV, or "Original Animation Video") was the name that would end up designating the animated projects (often series) that were released directly onto video, in order to differentiate these from anime produced for theatrical release or for television. However, as Clements points out, many of the first OVAs were projects initially made for, but rejected by, television channels, notably the title that is commonly[1] referred to as the first

[1] Clements and McCarthy 2006; Zahlten 2007; Clements 2013

direct-to-video anime, *Dallos* (*Darosu*, dir: Oshii Mamoru, 1983, released by Bandai) [Figure 5]:

> 'To many of its makers, [*Dallos*] was regarded as a "failed" television project, dumped onto video in order to recoup development costs after proposals for a fifty-two episode TV version were rejected [...] Such a derogatory attitude seems to have been widespread among animators, who initially regarded video as a cheaper but less desirable alternative to the established media.' (Clements 2013: 168)

The release of *Dallos*, foundational though it proved to be, illustrates the disorganized state of direct-to-video releasing during the 'age of confusion' of the early 1980s. While only four episodes of *Dallos* were eventually made, a distribution mishap accidentally caused the second episode to be released before the first. While Clements and McCarthy (2006: 129) judge that the makers of *Dallos* 'had yet to realize that the video audience would be slightly older than the viewership for TV serials', the pornographic sector recognized this niche market appeal early on, embracing the video format to capitalize on 'animation's facility in depicting scenes that would be prohibitively expensive or illegal to stage with real people.' (Clements 2013: 170) The first erotic OVA, part one in the *Lolita Anime* series, was released in February 1984, only two months after the first (technically the second, as we have seen) episode of *Dallos*.

Figure 5: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Dallos*

Clements argues that it was only as the 1980s wore on that producers and distributors came to understand that niche appeal was video's great strength, and that this aspect of the new medium liberated animation in particular of having to conform to the conservative guidelines of national television. By 1986, half the titles in the anime video market (then worth a total of 9.9 billion yen, compared to 2.7 billion in 1983) were OVA. Other signs that the animation and film industries were beginning to acknowledge video as a 'third medium' (Tokui 1999: 310, quoted in Clements 2013: 157) included Kadokawa's decision to halt its strategy of simultaneous releasing in 1984: the expansion of the video market made the company decide to return to a hierarchy of release windows, in order to strengthen the position of Kadokawa Video (Zahlten 2007: 483).

Just as in the United States, the expansion of home video during the 1980s resulted in a market for movies that proved more profitable than theatrical exhibition: by 1985 the number of prerecorded videotapes produced[2] surpassed the number of films released in theaters (Hatano 1985: 121); by 1989 the total number of video rental stores in Japan had reached 16,000 (Zahlten 2007: 313), with video rentals nationwide totaling

[2] Alvarado gives the number of prerecorded videotapes containing films and animation produced in Japan between April 1984 and March 1985 as 736. If all forms of content – including feature films and animation, but also instructional videos, music videos, 'adult entertainment', etc. – are taken into account, the number of prerecorded tapes produced during this period was 1,669 (Alvarado 1988: 81). The total number of feature films released theatrically in Japan in 1985 was 583. (Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, http://www.eiren.org/statistics_e/ [accessed July 18, 2016])

840,000,000,[3] in a year that the total number of tickets sold at film theaters was 143,000,000 (Yamane 1993: 67). The headline above a six-page report in the October 5, 1988 edition of trade paper *Nikkei Entertainment* exclaimed 'There Is Not Enough Soft!?'[4]

The rapidly expanding markets of video rental and 24-hour broadcasting through cable and satellite,[5] the article observed, combined to create a clamor for *sofuto* – short for software, in other words media content, and movies in particular. The age of confusion had unambiguously come to an end.

By this time, furthermore, Japan's economic boom had positively gone supernova: a combination of rapid appreciation of the yen and centralization of administrative and economic activity in the major cities (particularly in Tokyo and Osaka), coupled with increased public spending and the lowering of interest rates by the Bank of Japan, had created a situation in which asset prices and stock prices skyrocketed, while 'lenders were practically throwing money at their clients.' (Kaplan and Dubro 2003: 190) This "bubble economy" (*baburu keizai*) had an effect on the film industry as well, epitomized in most spectacular fashion by the corporate takeovers of Hollywood studios by Japanese electronics giants: Sony bought Columbia Pictures in 1989 and the following year Matsushita, parent company of JVC, acquired MCA, parent company of Universal Studios. The developers

[3] i.e. an average of just under 144 rentals per store per day.

[4] 'Sofuto ga tarinai!?', *Nikkei Entertainment*, October 5, 1988, pp. 6-12; quoted in Zahlten 2007: 339

[5] Cable television and broadcast satellite service would start in Japan in 1989 (Sharp 2011: xxxvi), the same year that Toei Video launched V-Cinema.

of Betamax and VHS now owned a large chunk of Hollywood.

The dearth of media content that had resulted from the rapid expansion of the video and broadcasting markets in preceding years went hand-in-hand with rising prices for video and broadcast rights. As Zahlten points out, companies involved in video packaging and distribution began to see that for the cost of purchasing the rights to existing content, they could produce their own films – in which case they retained the rights indefinitely. The easy availability of investment capital removed the hurdle of gathering the necessary funds for production. It was in this climate that film studio Toei, 'the major company still most grounded in production and with one of the longest standing involvements in the video market' (Zahlten 2007: 339-340), launched a line of direct-to-video feature films under the moniker "V-Cinema."

I – 'Neither Film Nor Television': Gestation and Development of V-Cinema

The Toei Company had been releasing OVA since 1986.[6] That it distributed these titles under a specialist "V-Anime" label suggests that, by then, direct-to-video releasing was no longer the last refuge of the forsaken, but had gained enough momentum to be explicitly identified and used as a distinguishing component in the marketing of new product. In

[6] http://www.toei.co.jp/dvd/ [accessed July 30, 2016]. Toei already had a long history as an animation pioneer: Toei Animation's 1958 production *Legend of the White Serpent* (*Hakujaden*, a.k.a. *Panda and the White Serpent*, dir: Yabushita Taiji) was Japan's first full-color, feature-length animated film (see Clements 2013: 98-99).

the latter half of the 1980s, therefore, the 'third medium' had been well and truly established as a viable format for releasing films in Japan.

Both Yamane Sadao (1993: 60) and Tanioka Masaki (1999: 66) point toward the commercial success on video of the *Battles without Honor and Humanity* (*Jingi naki tatakai*, dir: Fukasaku Kinji, 1973-'74) series as a catalyst for Toei Video's decision to start making and releasing DTV feature films. This five-part series about the development of organized crime and the foundation of the yakuza in post-war Japan had, since its original theatrical release, remained a favorite for all-night movie marathons. Toei's sequential home video releases of the five films between late 1987 and late 1988 allowed such marathons to be transplanted from repertory theaters into people's homes (Yamane 1993: 60). Toei Video[7] executive Yoshida Tatsu was in the habit of visiting video rental stores and speaking to customers as part of his market research. There he found that people would actually rent five films at once and, when asked how they managed to watch such a number of movies, learned that they made ample use of their VCR's fast-forward button when viewing the tapes at home. This gave Yoshida the resolve to produce 'movies that will not be fast-forwarded.' (Yoshida 1990: 5; Yamane 1993: 63)

In March of 1989, Toei Video released the film *Crime Hunter* (*Kuraimuhantā ikari no jūdan*, dir: Ōkawa Toshimichi) into Japan's estimated 16,000 video stores [Figure 6]. The

[7] Toei Video is a subsidiary of Toei Company, Ltd., rather than a department within it.

Figure 6: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Crime Hunter*

film's storyline follows a protagonist named Joe, a cop with the 'Little Tokyo' police department, and his hunt for the gang responsible for his partner's death. Along the way, he joins forces with a feisty young nun named Lily and a fugitive named Bruce, Joe's former nemesis, who has his own bone to pick with the gang. The film's 60-minute running time, which followed from Toei Video's chosen strategy to make a film 'that would not be fast-forwarded,' inevitably resulted in a good amount of narrative condensation. In *Crime Hunter*, the focus is on action and the build-up toward it. Many action scenes are further condensed into montage sequences. Dialogue scenes exist mostly to deliver essential exposition, while character development is limited to mood swings that are usually expressed not through acting but formally, as expressionistic visual mood pieces. This makes *Crime Hunter*, in a sense, pure action cinema, kinetic spectacle for its own sake – a procession of shoot-outs, car chases, and explosions, situated in the most archetypal settings: harbor docks, nighttime streets, nightclubs, and warehouses. The film's action hijinks, its bandana-sporting, alpha-male protagonists, and its lack of irony place *Crime Hunter* under the influence of American action movies of the period, particularly those starring Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger.[8] Yoshida Tatsu had felt that Japanese films were 'too explanatory, so they have no speed' (Yoshida 1990: 6)

[8] Though arguably such Schwarzenegger vehicles as *Commando* (dir: Mark L. Lester, 1985) and *Last Action Hero* (dir: John McTiernan, 1993) hardly lacked irony.

when compared to American action films such as those starring Stallone.[9]

With *Crime Hunter*, Toei Video had produced a film that not only capitalized on the now firmly established 'third medium' of home video, it had made a movie that was molded to fit dominant uses of the VCR. The device that was marketed as a means to disconnect viewing time from broadcast time also allowed the viewer to shift the chronology of narrative cinema by means of its fast-forward and rewind functions. By bypassing (so Toei Video hoped) the viewer's desire to press the fast-forward button, *Crime Hunter* reformatted narrative cinema for a previously non-existent time-shifting audience. The experiment was short-lived, however, as Toei Video quickly abandoned *Crime Hunter*'s 60-minute running time in favor of a more common feature length of between eighty and one hundred minutes for most subsequent releases. According to Yoshida Tatsu, this was because 'another [video rental store] customer told me that with a 60-minute film, the viewer has the impression that there is a part of the story missing.' (Yoshida quoted in Yamane 1993: 63) Narrative conventions seem to have swiftly won out over technological novelty: in Japan, as in the U.S., home video ultimately became simply another medium for watching movies.

[9] Sylvester Stallone was such a prominent role model for early V-Cinema that Toei Video, after the success of *Crime Hunter*, tried to mold the actor who played Bruce, the half-Italian, half-Japanese Matano Seiji, into a Japanese counterpart of the American action movie star, casting him as the lead in a string of films in which Matano wears bandanas and ripped tank tops while firing heavy weaponry, for example *The Emblem of Evil* (*Kyōaku no monshō*) and its sequel *The Tusk of Evil* (*Kyōaku no kiba*, both films dir: Narita Yūsuke, 1991).

Toei's Expansion of the V-Cinema Model

Toei Video consciously positioned *Crime Hunter* as the first entry in a new "V-Cinema" product line. The video box packaging boasted the tagline 'V-Cinema First Shot' (*V shinema daiichidan*), to evoke the excitement that waited within – as well as the promise of excitements yet to come, in future V-Cinema releases. The company sold some 16,000 tapes of *Crime Hunter*, meaning one cassette per rental store of a film with a reported production cost of roughly sixty million yen (at that time around US$ 460,000).[10] The official wholesale price of a single cassette of *Crime Hunter* was 12,800 yen (US$ 98).[11] Even knowing of the existence, as Zahlten points out (2007: 317), of package deals and discounts for rental store retailers, the profits Toei Video made on the inauguration of V-Cinema are evident. Before the year 1989 was over, the company had released its second and third "shots": the aptly titled *The Shootist* (*Sogeki*, dir: Ichikura Haruo, running time: 96 minutes) and the inevitable *Crime Hunter 2* (*Kuraimuhantā 2 uragiri no jūdan*, again directed by Ōkawa Toshimichi, with a running time of 75 minutes[12]).

[10] Yoshida 1990: 6; the conversion rate in March 1989 stood at 130.35 yen to one dollar [Bank of Japan Main Time-series statistics (Monthly); http://www.stat-search.boj.or.jp/ssi/mtshtml/m_en.html (retrieved August 4, 2016)]

[11] There was no distinction between wholesale and retail price of Japanese prerecorded videocassette releases, a situation that naturally favored the development of a rental market. The price of a tape was customarily printed on the packaging, usually toward the bottom of the spine.

[12] *Crime Hunter 3* (*Kuraimuhantā 3 minagoroshi no jūdan*) would follow in 1990, and also ran 75 minutes.

In February of 1990, Toei Video organized a promotional event to announce the ten V-Cinema titles it was planning to release that year. Ten new titles entailed an increase in the frequency of production and release to one per month from April of that year and subsequently to two or three new films per month from October.[13] The emphasis in this lineup was squarely on action films, though it also included a number of yakuza movies. The addition of the latter was perhaps inevitable, considering the Toei studio's longstanding activities in the genre, as well as the decisive influence that the *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* video releases had on the formation of the company's V-Cinema strategy. Zahlten (2007: 316) traces the predominance of these two genres in the early V-Cinema line-up to the backgrounds of the label's two main producers, Yoshida Tatsu and Kurosawa Mitsuru, the latter being the head of production company Central Arts, a Toei subsidiary that grew out of Toei Video's former in-house film production unit – and which in terms of V-Cinema still effectively functioned in that manner: a large number of Toei V-Cinema releases, particularly in the early years, were Central Arts productions. Yoshida Tatsu was an old hand at Toei, who had apprenticed under Shundō Kōji, the producer generally credited with creating the studio's signature *ninkyō eiga*, or chivalrous yakuza films, which dominated the company's output between roughly 1962 and 1972, when, in the wake of the success of *Battles Without Honor and Humanity*, this style of yakuza picture was superseded in popularity

[13] The number of new Toei V-Cinema releases in 1990 eventually reached thirteen. (Tanioka 1999: 66)

by the *jitsuroku* (true account) style.[14] Before joining Toei in 1977, Kurosawa Mitsuru was already a veteran of the Nikkatsu studio, whose roster of action films included the "borderless" (*mukokuseki*) style that formed the company's hallmark for much of the 1950s and '60s: contemporary action films set in spaces where nationality is kept intentionally unspecific – a characteristic also applied to the Central Arts-produced *Crime Hunter*.[15] Higashi Takuma (2002: 178) places V-Cinema in a continuum of stages in the evolution of Toei's generic output, and sees the predominance of action films as the result of 'explorations' in the same genre by Toei Central Film, a subsidiary of the studio founded in 1977 to produce and distribute low-budget films for contracted theaters that could not afford to screen the more expensive productions Toei distributed, such as the films produced by the Kadokawa Corporation (Sharp 2011: 254). Higashi's six-step model of Toei's generic development is greatly simplified and he reduces the relative breadth of Toei Central Film's output[16] to the

[14] As has often been noted (Schrader 1974: 17; Schilling 2003: 26), Shundo Kōji was either himself a former yakuza or had had close associations with organized crime before entering Toei.

[15] On Nikkatsu action films and the borderless style, see Mark Schilling, *No Borders, No Limits: Nikkatsu Action Cinema*. Godalming: FAB Press, 2007

[16] Toei Central Film occasionally produced, but it was mainly a distribution company. It released, for example, the independently produced films of directors such as Sōmai Shinji, Ishii Sōgo, and Izutsu Kazuyuki, and several pink films. Oguri Kōhei's drama *Muddy River* (*Doro no kawa*, 1981), based on Miyamoto Teru's Osamu Dazai Award winning novel, was also distributed in Japan by Toei Central Film, and won the Kinema Junpō Best Ten, the Mainichi Film Concours, and the Blue Ribbon Award in

three films in the *Yūgi* series of comical action films about a hitman played by actor Matsuda Yūsaku.[17] In spite of these simplifications, his arguing for Toei Central Film as a predecessor to Toei V-Cinema is valid, since Kurosawa Mitsuru was the company's main producer and several alumni of the *Yūgi* series would go on to play a role in the early years of Toei V-Cinema, including director Murakawa Tōru, scriptwriter Maruyama Shōichi, and assistant director Sai Yōichi.[18]

In the simplest and most pragmatic terms, however, '[a]ction films can be cheap to make, and there has long been a niche market for them' (Bordwell 2011: 127). The genre's ubiquity among early V-Cinema releases would prompt Yamane Sadao to coin new terms in an attempt to more specifically describe and categorize the various subtypes common in Japanese DTV action fare. *Crime Hunter* had been a 'gun action' film, while the first title in Toei's regular release schedule of 1990, *Black Princess: Angel from Hell* (*Burakkupurinsesu jigoku no tenshi*, dir: Tanaka Hideo), about a young policewoman out for revenge against

Japan. Abroad, it received the Silver Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1981 and was nominated for the Academy Award for Foreign Language Film in 1982.

[17] The series consisted of: *The Most Dangerous Game* (*Mottomo kiken na yūgi*, 1978), *Murder Game* (*Satsujin yūgi*, 1978), and *Execution Game* (*Shokei yūgi*, 1979). Murakawa Tōru directed all three films.

[18] An additional salient detail is that Toei Central Film was dissolved in 1988, shortly before the start of Toei V-Cinema.

the drug lord that killed her cop brother, was a 'female action' movie (Yamane 1993: 66) [Figure 7]. Both films provided generic templates for numerous later Japanese DTV productions, by Toei and other companies, though the 'female action' category would become increasingly conflated with another of Yamane's subgenre labels, 'sexy action.' Exemplary in this regard is Toei Video's long-running V-Cinema series *XX* (*Daburu ekkusu*, eleven installments including the four-part spin-off series *Another XX*, released 1993 through 1998), which mixes violent action and hefty doses of eroticism with elements of hard-boiled noir: the female protagonist of each episode is a curious mixture of stylish femme fatale, tough action heroine, and debased sex object. To clarify the lineage, the lead role in the first entry, *XX: Beautiful Weapon* (*XX utsukushiki kyōki*, dir: Komizu Kazuo, 1993), was played by Miyazaki Masumi, star of *Black Princess* and its 1991 sequel *Black Princess 2: Flaming Target* (*Burakkupurinsesu 2 honō no hyōteki*, dir: Tanaka Hideo).

An important factor in how *Crime Hunter* and *Black Princess* created generic templates is the gender discourse at work in both text and reception. There are numerous similarities between the two films, in terms of character motivations, plots, and even scene settings, yet the strong male bias in the discourse creates separate modalities: the latter is given the separate category 'female action' for having a woman as protagonist, an aspect that is further underlined by the film's title and the opening gunfight scene that

Figure 6: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Black Princess: Angel from Hell*

features Miyazaki Masumi wielding a high-caliber handgun while clad in a bathing suit.[19] As we have already seen, holders of video store memberships in Japan during this period and for the years to follow were overwhelmingly male, and it is for this reason that Toei Video initially aimed at 15- to 30-year-old males as the target audience for V-Cinema (Yamane 1993: 64). This brings us back to one of the characteristics Ramon Lobato identified in his model of DTV: the faithful contribution to an established subgenre that fits comfortably into a specific video store category and features the required number of explosions, car chases, and topless girls. This is a description that fits every single Toei V-Cinema release of 1990, from the sequels to *Crime Hunter*, *Black Princess*, and *The Shootist* to the female twist on *Robocop* entitled *Lady Battle Cop* (*Onna batorukoppu*, dir: Okamoto Akihisa).[20]

Toei made sure its titles fit snugly into video store categories by remaining in close contact with video retailers. Yamane (1993: 64) describes Yoshida's habit of attending regular meetings with storeowners, to gauge interest in Toei Video's slate of proposed V-Cinema productions. Based on these reactions, the company decided the final production and release schedules. In this manner, Toei Video

[19] By contrast, and as further support to the observation that 'female action' and 'sexy action' increasingly merged, *XX: Beautiful Weapon* features the actress's first full-nude scene.

[20] One could make an exception for the topless girls: the early Toei titles were on the whole remarkably chaste, especially in the light of V-Cinema's later reputation for vulgar spectacle, as well as Toei's history in exploitation films.

could essentially predict the profits of a given film before it even went into production, since it collected orders from video stores on the basis of these meetings. This was a trusted strategy for DTV producers the world over: the presale, a method of financing by which the film's budget is gathered through one-off payments from various partners in return for certain rights. In an international context these were often the territorial rights. For Toei, dealing only with a domestic rental store market meant that the company retained all the rights to its productions, since what it sold were only physical copies of videotapes. Here, the combination of a recognizable genre, a catchy title, and often a star (particularly later, when V-Cinema began producing its own star system) told video store owners all they needed to know. Lobato notes that the presale was a strategy that particularly suited smaller production companies with a regular turnout of new product, since the deals were 'quick, simple and easy' (Lobato 2012: 27) for both sides, avoiding complicated revenue-sharing constructions. This would explain why the video rental market in Japan did not suffer the tensions between retailers and producers that marked the American situation, where Hollywood studios tried several times, in vain, to force storeowners to conform to a system of rental revenue sharing.[21]

[21] For an example, see Greenberg 2008: 119-121. In Japan, this situation would change, however, as the Culture Convenience Club corporation and its nation-wide rental store chain Tsutaya gained ground and began to introduce a Pay-Per-Transaction (PPT) system. Under this business model, supported by the consolidated buying power of a network of stores, Tsutaya pays the distributor a greatly reduced price per tape, plus a percentage of the income for each rental transaction. As Zahlten notes, this

Industry Responses to Toei V-Cinema

Some of the titles among Toei Video's release roster of the year 1990, including the action film *The Shootist 2* (*Sogeki 2*, dir: Ichikura Haruo) and the comedic yakuza movie *Neo Chinpira: Zoom Goes the Bullet* (*Neo chinpira teppōdama pyū*, dir: Takahashi Banmei), sold over 30,000 copies, still on an average budget of 60-70 million yen per film (Yoshida 1990: 7). Indeed, nine titles out of the top thirty of bestselling videos in 1990 were Toei V-Cinema productions and Toei was now making 22% of its annual income from video (Zahlten 2007: 342). The commercial success of Toei's venture could not help but attract the attention of other producers and distributors. Bandai, already well experienced in the field of OVA (it had released *Dallos* in 1983), had its first direct-to-video feature release in stores within four months of *Crime Hunter*: the erotic drama *Strawberry Times* (*Sutoroberī taimusu*, dir: Harada Daisaburō) was the first title on the company's specialist DTV label "C-Moon". Tohokushinsha debuted its "Video Graph" label in April 1990 with the 'sexy action' film *Big Breast Hunter* (*Kyonyū hantā*, dir: Watanabe Hisashi), while Nikkatsu followed in July that same year with the 'car action' film *Capital City Expressway Trial 2* (*Shuto kōsoku toraiaru 2*, dir: Kataoka Shūji), the first title in its "V-

system is a liability for the smaller production and distribution companies that tend to operate in the V-Cinema market, since it places the financial risk on their shoulders and cuts off the financial supply line inherent in the presale model. Since the tapes cost much less for the stores to buy, the PPT system also favors the acquisition of multiple copies of the same blockbuster titles, which can be relegated to the sales or the trash bin after they've passed their peak profitability. A similar model was employed in the United States video rental market by the Rentrak distribution chain, see Herbert 2013: 164-168.

Figure 7: In-store advertising for Toei Video's 1990 releases *Neo Chinpira: Zoom Goes the Bullet* and *Black Princess: Angel from Hell*

Feature" line-up. Throughout 1990 and 1991, numerous companies followed the trend: Japan Home Video launched a "V-Movie" label, VIP came up with "V-Picture", while Shochiku hardly scaled the heights of originality with "SHV Cinema".[22] Indeed, the copycat frenzy contributed to anchoring the V-Cinema moniker in the public consciousness: the Toei Video trademark quickly became synonymous with the entire phenomenon of direct-to-video live action features and is used to this day as the generic term for Japanese DTV. Other terms in use include "video movie" (*bideo eiga*), "video straight" (*bideo sutorēto*), and "original video" (*orijinaru bideo*, also rendered as *bideo orijinaru* or "video original"), but these are used only to refer to individual works and can furthermore be applied to any work that has been produced for video release – including exercise tapes, educational videos, or idol videos – and not to the DTV phenomenon as a whole. Only the term V-Cinema constitutes 'a recognizable body of films and a certain industry that participate in common discourses' (Zahlten 2007: 319).

It was not only established studios and existing film production companies that rushed to fill this new niche market, however. The generous investments funds available during the economic Bubble period facilitated the emergence of a host of new arrivals, mostly in

[22] The debut titles on these labels were: Japan Home Video: the 'gun action' film *Blowback* (*Burōbakku mayōnaka no gyangu-tachi*, dir: Muroga Atsushi, November 1990); VIP: the 'sexy action' film *Sailor Suit Tattoo* (*Sērāfuku TATTOO*, dir: Naitō Tadashi, April 1991); Shochiku: the 'female action' film *Codename 348: Lady Cop Grey-Faced Buzzard* (*Kōdonēmu 348 onnadeka sashiba*, dir: Mukai Kan, December 1990). By 1991, Shochiku had dropped the "Cinema" part and continued releasing DTV titles as "SHV" (Shochiku Home Video).

the planning and/or distribution sector, [23] often fly-by-night outfits that would disappear after releasing a handful of titles. Few people working in the film industry are willing to state this for the record, but it is a public secret that quite a few of these smaller distribution outfits were front companies for, or had involvement with, organized crime. The yakuza were no strangers to the video business, having been active in hardcore pornography and video piracy since at least the early 1980s (Kaplan and Dubro 2003: 181), and the profits that were being made in V-Cinema would surely have been as interesting a business opportunity as any in which crime syndicates were involved during those years. Kaplan and Dubro (2003: 185-186) mention that, in 1989, Tokyo police had identified over 700 underworld front companies in the capital, whose business interests ranged 'from finance and real estate to waste disposal and artwork', and that many of these were quasi-legitimate operations, their true identities unknown even to many of their employees.

No sooner had V-Cinema established its commercial appeal than a crisis hit that would shake up the newly minted order: over the course of 1990-1991, the asset price bubble burst, leaving corporations with bad balance sheets that had mostly been backed

[23] Planning (*kikaku*) refers to the creation of the basic concept of a film. This is the task of a type of company called a "video maker" (*bideomēkā*). Though Zahlten refers to them as 'video packaging companies', within V-Cinema the video maker decides the genre, title, and star of a film, and gathers production funds, as well as handling marketing and distribution. The actual production of the film, often including the choice of director, is outsourced to a specialist film production company. Examples of notable "video makers" within the V-Cinema field are KSS and GP Museum. Toei Video is also effectively a "video maker."

by assets now rapidly declining in value, and leaving banks with countless outstanding loans unlikely to be repaid. Any capital still available could no longer be invested, since few prospect were likely to return a profit. The burst of the bubble contributed to the swift disappearance of many smaller players in the V-Cinema arena. As Zahlten notes (2007: 342), outside investment in the film industry ceased practically overnight, as companies chose to focus on their core activities and jettison a variety of side investments now rendered burdensome. This also afflicted film companies that had engaged in non-traditional investments like golf ranges and amusement parks, such as Nikkatsu, which filed for bankruptcy in 1993.[24]

[24] http://variety.com/1993/biz/news/nikkatsu-files-for-bankruptcy-108433/ [accessed August 14, 2016]

The film companies that proved to be more robust, however, showed no signs of weakening. Despite the fact that the 16,000 video rental stores Japan possessed in 1989 formed a peak number that would gradually decline, demand for content was still high and rising thanks to the broadcast market, particularly the growth in satellite channels. V-Cinema provided limited investment risk due to its low production budgets: those of Toei Video formed the upper echelon, with other companies spending much less per title, occasionally by a factor of ten lower. Low risk provided a degree of flexibility in terms of planning, production, and marketing – an opportunity to create recognizable product to appeal to specific niche markets, not merely the 15-to-30-year-old males initially targeted by Toei. As Zahlten (2007: 344) points out, V-Cinema was still in its formative years when

the bubble burst, which gave it enough flexibility to adjust to the economic upheaval. It did so primarily by adopting two paradoxical strategies: increased mining of proven formulas and diversification of genres and audiences – both made possible, as well as necessary, by a rapid increase in production.

Stars and Genres

V-Cinema was prone to serialization from its earliest existence, with the release of *Crime Hunter 2* following just a few months after *Crime Hunter*, and within the same year. Among Toei Video's releases from the period 1989 through 1992, sequels were a regular but relatively modest presence, and never with a number higher than a '2' or '3' in the title. However, in years that followed, the degree of serialization that became characteristic of V-Cinema as a whole, all companies confounded, has been qualified as 'excessive' (Zahlten 2007: 312). Series with installments running into the double digits – such as the 60 episodes of *The King of Minami* (*Nanba kinyūden Minami no teiō*, released by KSS, 1992-2007), about an Osaka loan shark played by Takeuchi Riki – became the rule rather than the exception as the decade wore on. As Zahlten notes, serialization held appeal from the standpoint of both production – facilitating the shooting of several episodes at once using the same cast and crew in order to cut time and cost – and distribution – contributing to brand recognition. That the final product be recognizable is of vital importance, since marketing and promotion of V-Cinema productions is, like American DTV, largely limited to the confines of the video store and within this spatial context further limited primarily to the video box packaging. Since V-

Cinema generates little to nothing in the way of discourse, it is safe to say few people go into the video store with the intention of renting a specific V-Cinema work, especially one whose title ends with a double-digit number. The movies therefore have to rely on instant appeal by standing out from their effective competitors: their neighbors, those in the next aisle or even the next box.

One way to achieve this on-site appeal is through the casting of stars in lead roles. Here, V-Cinema adheres to the model identified by Lobato, with a strategy of casting that crosses over with other areas of entertainment such as music, modeling, sports, and television drama, and occasionally with the film industry at large. Early releases relied on existing name value in other areas to appeal to customers, for example with the casting of musician Sera Masanori as the hero of *Crime Hunter* and its sequels. Subsequent to the success of certain titles, V-Cinema gradually built its own star system, one that stood quite apart from those of theatrical films or television serials. In V-Cinema too, actors possess different degrees of mobility: Chiba Shinichi, Kusakari Masao, or Nakamura Tōru seem to move fairly freely back and forth between these formats, while other actors have had to carve out a niche for themselves in V-Cinema after landing there 'on the way down' from a career in theatrical films, such as Watanabe Hiroyuki, Ozawa Hitoshi, or Shimizu Kōjirō. V-Cinema has also formed a road to mainstream stardom, for such actors as Abe Hiroshi, Ihara Tsuyoshi, and Kagawa Teruyuki, all of whom worked extensively as lead actors in V-Cinema before going on to become household names thanks to their appearances on television and in theatrical films – none of them have since

gone back to V-Cinema. The major stars of V-Cinema, however, notably Takeuchi Riki and Aikawa Shō (also rendered as Show) have never managed to become more than occasional support actors in theatrical films and rarely if ever appear in television drama.[25]

Zahlten posits that V-Cinema used 'excessive texts' (2007: 346) as its main strategy to appeal to consumers, and that this also holds true for the star system V-cinema developed, particularly in the figures of its 'Big Two' stars, Takeuchi and Aikawa. Higashi Takuma also observes 'excessive expression' to be a characteristic of V-Cinema and argues, furthermore, that the popularity of these two actors in V-Cinema and their contrasting absence in theatrical films and TV drama are intricately connected: 'they cannot fit the scale of television drama because they embody excess.' (Higashi 2002: 179) Takeuchi Riki in particular almost literally personifies the characteristics of V-Cinema, in particular its penchant for serialization. Coming into V-Cinema from a background in modeling and occasional acting, he was cast as the hero's ill-fated partner in *Crime Hunter* and was therefore a part of the very formation of V-Cinema. In addition to the aforementioned *King of Minami*, Takeuchi stars in a host of other ongoing series, the majority of them in the yakuza genre, including *Code of Conduct* (*Jingi*, 50+ episodes, released by various companies including Tokuma Japan Communications and Shochiku, 1994-2012) and *Man's Road* (*Otoko michi*, six episodes,

[25] Takeuchi Riki appeared in, for example, Fukasaku Kinji's *Battle Royale II: Requiem* (*Batoru rowaiaru II requiem*, 2003). Aikawa Shō was among the cast of Imamura Shōhei's Palme d'or winner *The Eel* (*Unagi*, 1997).

Figure 8: Japanese rental VHS cover for *The King of Minami 2* (*Nanba kinyūden Minami no teiō 2*, 1992, dir: Haginiwa Masaaki), starring Takeuchi Riki

Toei V-Cinema, 2000-2001). With an acting range that seems willfully limited to a handful of expressions, 'endlessly reproducing the same scowls, sneers and yakuza growls in various degrees of cartoonishness' (Zahlten 2007: 492) that have become his instantly recognizable trademark (along with his hairstyle, an always immaculate pompadour), Takeuchi has molded himself as an actor to fit the particular needs and demands of V-Cinema on the levels of both production and distribution: he appears in up to twenty titles per year, while the degree of serialization of these films, the limited number of genres he appears in, and the similarity of his performances / personae between films combine to create a recognizable "brand" commodity based on repetition[26] [Figure 9].

The case of Aikawa Shō is slightly different: although this former dancer also appears in some fifteen films a year, his choice of roles and genres is more diverse than Takeuchi's. In Aikawa's case, however, since his star-making turn in *Neo Chinpira: Zoom Goes the Bullet* (1990) a marketing discourse has been built up around him by which the actor became 'a genre unto himself'[27] within V-Cinema: 'Shō, what will you do this time?' ran the tagline in a promotional trailer for one of his films.[28]

[26] Takeuchi also has a singing career, while his production company Riki Project markets a line of men's apparel that emulates the flashy suits he wears in his yakuza roles.

[27] Interview with Kurosawa Kiyoshi by the author (Tokyo, October 2012).

[28] Trailer for *Code of Conduct for Apprentice Gangsters: Paradise Dragonfly* (*Chinpira jingi gokuraku tonbo*, dir: Kohira Yutaka, 1994)

In spite of centering on Aikawa's perceived versatility, this discourse nevertheless revolves around a set of recognizable physical traits that carry over from film to film (including a number of Aikawa's performances in theatrical films), notably his distinctive voice – which Higashi (2002: 181) qualifies as 'polyphonic' – as well as hairstyles and costumes [Figure 10].

Female actors are allowed a much narrower range of mobility than their male counterparts. The early years of Toei V-Cinema initially demonstrate a degree of variety in the types of films with female lead actors, such as the 'female action' prototype of *Black Princess*, but also *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Kill Notice* (*Joshū Sasori satsujin yokoku*, dir: Ikeda Toshiharu, 1991), the revival of a series of women-in-prison films that had been a major hit for Toei in the early 1970s, whose V-Cinema reincarnation starred former model and 'race queen' Okamoto Natsuki. Another noteworthy example is *Stranger* (*Yoru no sutorenjā kyōfu*, dir: Nagasaki Shunichi, 1991): its lead actress Natori Yūko was already a star thanks to her lead performances in successful theatrical films such as *Tokyo Bordello* (*Yoshiwara enjō*, dir: Gosha Hideo, 1987) and in television productions. In *Stranger* she plays a reformed swindler working as a cab driver in Tokyo. Director Nagasaki, who also developed the story and wrote the screenplay, says he pitched the project to Toei because 'Toei V-Cinema had momentum at the time. If a project had a certain degree of action and suspense, then a project with a female protagonist could get

Figure 9: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Alias: Pistol Ken* (*Tsūshō! Pisuken*, 1996, dir: Takahashi Banmei), starring Aikawa Shō

made even if it didn't contain any sexual scenes.'[29]

However, as noted earlier, the selling point of a film with a female lead became increasingly conflated with sexual subject matter. This is not to say these films did not attract household names as stars, but instead of an actress at the peak of her fame, as with Natori Yūko, roles requiring nudity and sexual situations more often went to actresses past their prime or former teen idols and swimsuit models, to whom work in V-Cinema represented an opportunity to regenerate a flagging entertainment career. The interaction with other areas of show business continued here as well, in particular with nude modeling: the lifting of the ban on the depiction of pubic hair (which previously had to be censored to avoid charges of obscenity) led to a surge in the publication of "full nude" photo books from around 1992 (Fujiki 2014: 53). V-Cinema found in this trend a pool of potential actresses for erotic productions that naturally rode this "full nude" wave. An example is Ōtake Hitoe, a former Miss Japan contestant whose 1994 nude photo book *Hitoe* became a bestseller and led to her casting in the Toei V-Cinema production *Molester Diary: The Man Who Continued Caressing the Buttocks* (*Chikan nikki: shiri o nademawashi tsuzuketa otoko*, dir: Tomioka Tadafumi, 1995). This formed the start of a prolific career for Ōtake as a lead actress in straight-to-video erotic films.

The gender politics of V-Cinema are effective beyond dictating what genres women can star in, as Zahlten observes when he points out that whereas male actors like

[29] Interview with Nagasaki Shunichi by the author (e-mail, September 2013).

Takeuchi Riki reappear again and again in subsequent installments of successful V-Cinema series, female lead actors tend to change from film to film even within series. The success of *Molester Diary* instigated a further five films (1995-1998), but Ōtake Hitoe only appeared in the first two episodes of this series, as well as in occasional episodes of several other Toei V-Cinema erotic film series, such as *Female Teacher Diary* (*Onna kyōshi nikki*, three installments, 1995-1997) and *Apartment Wife '98* (*Danchizuma'98*, two installments, 1997-1998). Another clear example is Toei's aforementioned *XX* series, which makes a selling point out of having a different female lead in almost every installment – an example copied by other 'sexy action' series such as *Zero Woman* (*Keishichō zero-ka no onna*, nine installments, 1995-2007, released mostly by Maxam).[30] 'Repetition is retained as an eminently male privilege' (Zahlten 2007: 374) and, with serialization playing such a central role in developing actors' careers in V-Cinema, the same holds true for stardom. This effect is further intensified by the stigmatization of actresses who appear in erotic V-Cinema. They encounter difficulties in being considered for roles in theatrical films and television productions, whereas male colleagues suffer little from being typecast in V-Cinema as for

[30] The marketing of the *XX* series also further illustrates the symbiotic relationship between V-Cinema erotica and the nude photo book publishing, as the release of many of the series' installments was accompanied by a photo book with revealing shots of the film's lead actress. Examples include the book featuring Miyazaki Masumi, *XX: Holy Body* (1993), and Natsuki Yōko's *XX: Bizarre* (1995).

instance gangsters or policemen, since such roles are common in television and theatrical productions as well (Takatori 2014: 211). The gender distinction is visible quite directly in promotion and packaging as well. The front cover of the video box for a movie with a male star will often consist simply of the star's face in close-up, whereas with women, the packaging tends to emphasize the body.

Genre makes for another effective method of creating instant appeal. Bordwell's observation that action films always have a niche market is equally true for any other genre, since a genre is itself a niche of popular cinema and each genre appeals to a specific audience (a 'constellated community', in Rick Altman's words (1999: 166)) or to a specific desire in the viewer at a given time, 'wanting to watch a comedy, say, if they've had a bad day' (Grant 2007: 20). Genre films appeal to their viewers on the basis of expectations, which are in turn the result of the viewer's familiarity with the conventions of that genre (Grant 2007: 21). Given the central role of packaging in the promotion of V-Cinema productions, what a potential viewer can expect from a film needs to be conveyed in the span of a quick look at the video box. The paratextual factors become all important: if the film is to appeal to the rental store customer, the cover art has to succeed at overcoming worries, raising hopes and engendering expectations (Gray 2010: 26). Packaging of V-Cinema communicates primarily through stars – who, as we have seen, are often identified with a genre or even with a subgenre: Shimizu Kentarō, for instance, is primarily known for mahjong gambling films – and through iconography, particularly the 'outer forms' (Buscombe 2003: 15) or characteristic objects associated with a

genre: guns, suits, and tattoos for a yakuza film, for example. V-Cinema also employs a stock of catchphrases and terms to create expectation. These are generally not traditional genre descriptions or the idiom coined by Yamane mentioned earlier, but rather function as indications of a film's "ingredients": renters of *Killing Angel: Muhan* (*Muhan*, dir: Kanazawa Katsuji, 1995, Nikkatsu V-Feature) can expect 'super violence eros' (*sūpā baiorensu erosu*), while the protagonist of *The Doberman Cop* (*Dōberuman deka*, dir: Gotō Daisuke, 1996, Toei V-Cinema) is a 'hardboiled weapon' (*hādoboirudo na kyōki*) according to the front cover, as well as a 'legendary violence hero' (*densetsu no baiorensu hīrō*) on the reverse side [Figure 11].

Toei Video's initial rigidity in terms of genre gave way to gradual diversification during the course of 1991 and 1992. This period can be regarded as a second phase in the development of V-Cinema; whereas the first phase could be said to consist almost entirely of the pioneering strategies and activities of Toei Video, the second phase is characterized by competing parties establishing themselves as agents of change. As we have seen, competition by then had increased greatly and many of the major and minor players that had entered the field were initially reproducing Toei's proven formulas for commercial success. Zahlten argues that this situation of 'overproduction and a crowded production environment' led to a 'crisis' circa 1993 (2007: 373).

For Toei, diversification was a means to distinguish itself from its competitors and it took this act of distinction quite literally, by creating a number of V-Cinema sub-labels, "imprints" whose names instantly

Figure 10: Japanese rental VHS cover for *The Doberman Cop*

identified and expressed the ways in which the content of the movies released under them, as well as their potential audiences, diverged from the action and yakuza templates so closely identified with V-Cinema. With the 15-to-30 age bracket already established as a main target audience, a proper shift to movies made specifically for teenage viewers was but a small step. Toei Video specifically targeted a teenage and young adult audience when, in May 1991, it launched the "Young V-Cinema" label with *Their Magical Night* (*Futari no majikaru naito*, dir: Ushiyama Shinji), which was followed in February 1992 by *Touch Me Tenderly* (*Yasashiku kotaete*, dir: Suzuki Gen).[31] Nikkatsu had already preceded Toei down this road the previous year, a few months after inaugurating its "V-Feature" line. Its October 1990 release *Anxious Virgin: One More Time, I Love You* (*Dokidoki bājin mou ichido I LOVE YOU*, dir: Nakahara Shun) was a comedy about a teenage boy who dies in a traffic accident before he has had the chance to lose his virginity. He is reincarnated in the guise of a high school girl and proceeds to fall in love with his female classmate. Daiei entered the V-Cinema arena in July 1991 and its inaugural release, *Dance till Tomorrow* (*Asatte DANCE*, dir: Isomura Itsumichi), was a coming-of-age comedy featuring aimless twenty-something members of an amateur theatrical troupe, based on a manga by

[31] With regards to Nikkatsu taking the lead in exploring the youth market, it is worth noting that the company had a long history making youth films and that the genre formed one of the studio's mainstays between the late 1950s through the early 1970s. See Schilling 2007: 12-27.

Yamamoto Naoki that had already been made into a two-episode OVA in 1990 [Figure 12].

Two characteristics stand out concerning these youth films: one, they formed an exception to the limited mobility of V-Cinema actors, particularly for women: especially when compared to the plight of actresses in erotic productions, such female lead performers in V-Cinema youth comedies as Hada Michiko, Fujitani Miki, Nakayama Shinobu, and Matsushita Yuki all went on to lengthy careers as popular mainstream entertainers and, like male counterparts Abe Hiroshi and Kagawa Teruyuki, never returned to V-Cinema. The second salient aspect about the V-Cinema youth films is that they did not limit their appeal to males only. Given similarities in subject matter, casting choices, target audiences, as well as the timing of their production and release, it is likely that the vogue for these films derived from the success of the "trendy drama," Japanese television series produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which, according to Koichi Iwabuchi, 'devoted themselves to stylishly depicting various kinds of consumerist trends' and 'young people's yearnings for love, friendship, work, and dreams' in order to attract young viewers which until then had not been a target audience for TV dramas. (Iwabuchi 2004: 9-10)

Many of the V-Cinema works aimed at younger audiences were comedies and romances, and male and female leads were credited equally on packaging and in promotion. Comedy and romance helped to broaden the audience base, whether they were offered up as individual genres, in combination, or as additional flavors to other genres. A particularly noteworthy example of genre crossover made to appeal to a broad range of

Figure 11: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Dance till Tomorrow*

viewers is the *Quiet Don* series (*Shizuka naru don*, a.k.a. *Yakuza Side Story*, dir: Kashima Tsutomu, 1991-2001, twelve installments, released by KSS), about the estranged scion of a yakuza family (played by Kagawa Teruyuki) who leads his life as a common employee of an underwear design company, but is dragged back into the gang after his father passes away. Refusing to give up his day job, he has to juggle his two personas, which is presented as analogous to the Superman/Clark Kent dualism: when he steps out as a gang boss, he dons a large pair of sunglasses to make himself unrecognizable. The combination of yakuza genre conventions – which it parodies at the same time – romantic drama, and farcical comedy (the hero pines in secret for a female colleague who is in love with his yakuza persona without realizing they are one and the same) made the series popular with a wider audience than the adult males that traditionally support yakuza films (Zahlten 2007: 350).[32]

A set of successful generic models was eventually synthesized from the experiments in genre diversification that lasted roughly from 1991 through 1993. As we have seen, Toei became quite prolific in the production of erotic films, a development that stemmed in part from another sub-label it launched in late 1992, "V-Erotica." The titles released under this imprint, however, differ greatly in nature and form from the generic

[32] Its 'transmediality' (Zahlten 2007: 351) is further evidence of *The Quiet Don*'s impact with a wide audience: based on a manga by Nitta Tatsuo, it also produced an OVA (1991), two theatrical films (2000, 2009), a television series (1994-1995), and a second spin-off V-Cinema series, *New Quiet Don* (*Shin Sizuka naru don*, 1997-1998, six installments, released by KSS).

model of such later series as *Molester Diary* and *Female Teacher Diary*. The V-Erotica films, initiated with *Manila Emmanuelle: Bewitching Paradise* (*Manira Emanieru fujin mashō no rakuen*, dir: Niimura Ryōji, 1992), were relatively lavish transnational productions, shot in exotic foreign locations and with largely non-Japanese casts. This transnational nature also characterized the two other imprints Toei Video unveiled: V-America (first release in December 1992) and V-World (June 1993). As both monikers indicate, these aimed for a cosmopolitan gloss to create distinction in a market that, at least in terms of the number of releases, was still growing. We will go into the transnational aspect of these labels in section 4.II below, but for now it is enough to note that none of Toei Video's "V" imprints survived into the latter half of the 1990s. By 1995, Toei was releasing new titles either as "Toei V-Cinema" or under the company's general "Toei Video" label. This consolidation in generic and marketing terms did not mean an overall decrease in production. Toei Video may well have decided against continuing lavish international productions, but this looks likely to have cleared the way for a greater impulse of V-Cinema production. The year 1997 saw 31 Toei V-Cinema releases (Mitsumoto et al 2014: 148-158), a record number for the company.[33] By comparison, Toei released 16 V-Cinema titles in 1993. To virtually double its annual output in only three years, the company must have streamlined its production process to maximize cost efficiency. Indeed, the generic

[33] It is not a record number for V-Cinema as a whole, however: KSS reached 40 releases in 1993, for instance (Zahlten 2007: 345).

consolidation that came out of the diversification experiments of 1990 through 1993 also entailed more cost- and time-efficient production methods, such as the back-to-back production of two or three installments in a series. Though not a Toei production, the six-part series *Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself!* (*Katte ni shiyagare!!*, dir: Kurosawa Kiyoshi, 1995-1996, KSS) illustrates this method well: released as six separate titles, this Aikawa Shō-starring series actually consisted of only three separate productions, since two episodes were shot together each time. Cast and crew were under contract for one month, during which two films were shot, each requiring two weeks.[34]

In roughly the second half of the 1990s, therefore, development of V-Cinema enters a third phase, one of generic consolidation. Production methods and genre developed a symbiotic relationship in V-Cinema: the early reliance on a limited number of genres favored serialized production, after which the refinement of production methods for maximum efficiency entailed an increasing dependence on genres that lent themselves to these methods. Zahlten (2007: 347) identifies the main genres that came to dominate the V-Cinema market in the latter half of the 1990s as: yakuza films, finance / gambling films, and erotic films. What is noteworthy about this list is not that it's so short – V-Cinema limited its

[34] Interview with Shimoda Atsuyuki by the author (Tokyo, March 2014).

generic scope from the start[35] – but that it no longer includes the generic pillar of the early years of V-Cinema: action. Even a major outfit like Toei could not keep increasing its output without either an expanding market or a decrease in production budgets. The former was, as we have seen, not the case: both video and satellite/cable broadcasting had passed their peak by the mid-1990s, and the number of video rental stores had halved in comparison to 1989 (there were around 8000 stores in 1994), while the increasing dominance of national video rental chain Tsutaya upset the business model upon which the profitability of early V-Cinema had been built. The JVA and other interested parties began a series of campaigns to promote video rental that included giveaways for customers who had collected points on their rentals, and an effort to motivate storeowners to renew faded and frayed video jackets in order to clean up the image of the stores (Zahlten 2007: 371). That Toei, meanwhile, was lowering production budgets was becoming clear from some of the movies themselves, particularly many of the erotic films it released from 1994 onward, such as *Leave It to Moko* (*Moko ni omakase*, dir: Mochizuki Rokurō, 1994), a sex comedy about the workers and clients at a *soapland* brothel, or *Scan Doll* (*Skyandōru*, dir: Komatsu Takashi, 1996), about a young man spying on the neighbors in his apartment block by use of surveillance cameras. These were shot on video, where previously 16mm film had always been the norm in V-Cinema. The explosions and car

[35] Although it did continue to produce other genres beside the three mentioned, notably horror films, in the style that is intimately tied to V-Cinema: J-horror. See chapter 5.

stunts that were the stock-in-trade of early Toei V-Cinema were becoming too costly, and as the company tightened its belt, what was left of its action output was, as noted, increasingly interwoven with sexual subject matter, as per the *XX* series.[36]

While the growing share of sex among its output in the latter half of the 1990s was indicative of the financial difficulties in which V-Cinema was increasingly finding itself, the general economic and social insecurity of Japan's "Lost Decade" was also influencing the choice of genres and textual subject matter. The genre of finance (*kinyū*) or gambling (*gyanburu*) films is one that developed in V-Cinema under these specific circumstances and incorporates tales about gambling, money lending, and swindling. Though the genre's roots lie in the successful manga series many of these movies used as source material, and the Shochiku-released theatrical film *Pachinko Story* (*Pachinko monogatari*, dir: Tsuji Makoto, 1990) functioned as a prototype, V-Cinema, in characteristic fashion, churned out countless series and single films on all manner of popular gambling forms, most prominently pachinko,[37] mahjong, slot machines, and horse

[36] The *XX* series was at least still shot on film, which was not the case with some of its emulators, such as the previously mentioned *Zero Woman* series, which switched to shooting on video from its second installment *Zero Woman 2* (*Zero Woman II Keischicho zero-ka no onna*, dir: Gotō Daisuke, 1995, Maxam).

[37] Pachinko is a game in which the players must fire small balls into a vertical playing area studded with pins, after which the player must successfully manoeuver the balls into certain slots. Officially, pachinko is not a form of gambling, since participants can only win such prizes as stuffed toys and household items. However, near every

racing. The *King of Minami* series revolves around a loan shark with a Robin Hood mentality and, as Zahlten emphasizes, the protagonists of most of these films are often the *shomin*, the "common folk," struggling to make ends meet in post-Bubble Japan and looking toward gambling or borrowing as a quick way out of financial difficulties. Harkening back to the *shomin geki* films of the post-World War II period, which depicted the everyday hardships of common men and women, the finance genre 'gratifyingly positioned the spectator as an inhabitant of authentic Japan, as part of the nostalgic communal victim-space of *shomin*' (Zahlten 2007: 366). The pervasiveness of this character type as object of audience identification in the finance genre suggests that V-Cinema was targeting an older audience than in its early years or that this same early audience was now growing older: no longer in the 15-to-30 bracket with disposable income for fantasy stories about bandana-sporting gunmen, but working everymen with families, debts to pay off, and no job security, who found solace in seeing their plights sympathetically reflected in movies[38] – with the additional reassurance of seeing the same actor who once sported the bandana now clad in a suit and coming to the aide of other everymen. The films' form and their promotion play into this identification, with video boxes carrying the promise that watching

pachinko parlor is a separate booth where these prizes can be exchanged for cash. See: Manzenreiter 1998.

[38] Consumer-loan companies known as *sarakin* proliferated after the burst of the asset price bubble, as banks became more hesitant to grant loans. Many borrowers suffered financial problems due to the high interest rates, usually close to 30% (Sterngold 1993).

the film will teach the viewer how to beat the game, and the films themselves devoting part of their running time to explaining the rules and workings of for instance mahjong or pachinko machines – often narrated by a real-life professional player [Figure 13].

Though saddled with a slowly dwindling market and an almost complete lack of discourse (see below), the third phase of V-Cinema in the latter half of the 1990s remained a field of dynamic activity, flexible enough even to allow for the entry of several new players. The generic consolidation of the previous years and the crisis of overproduction that prompted it had reshuffled the cards, and while some companies, such as Shochiku and Daiei, ostensibly withdrew from V-Cinema and others went out of business, previously minor players and a few newcomers ended up with a winning hand by focusing rigidly (or, one could say, excessively) on what the market demanded or supported. Toei still performed solidly, as its output testified. KSS, which had entered the V-Cinema market in November 1990 with the hit-man action film *TUFF* (*Tafu*, dir: Harada Masato), had been a pioneer in the finance / gambling genre, releasing the first episode of *The King of Minami* series and some of the first pachinko films in 1991, as well as the *Quiet Don* series, which would remain popular throughout that decade. It was also quick to capitalize on the demand for sex films, establishing a separate label, “Pink Pineapple,” for erotic releases in 1994. GP Museum’s late arrival in V-Cinema, in 1995, allowed it to seize the momentum of genre consolidation, focusing almost exclusively on yakuza and gambling films for the remainder of the 1990s, after which, from 2000 onward, it would undergo its own period of generic

Figure 12: Japanese rental VHS cover for *True Mahjong Demon 12: Rebels of the Tabletop* (*Mājanki 12 takujō no hangyaku-sha-tachi*, 2002, dir: Kataoka Shūji)

experimentation with a string of sub-labels, including: “Boss,” for *jitsuroku*-style yakuza films; “Kiss,” which revived the youth comedies, albeit with a generous helping of eroticism and main actresses known for their appearances in adult video; and “Mermaid,” for more straightforward erotic works, including further variations on the perennial “molester” and “female teacher” templates. The market for erotic films also brought companies from the hardcore side of home video into the V-Cinema arena, notably TMC and Engel, further increasing the crossover between V-Cinema and the other major sector of DTV releasing, adult video – although the forms remained distinct: simulated narrative fiction versus explicit documentary depiction. Also worthy of note is the arrival of the first satellite TV channel entirely devoted to V-Cinema, V-Paradise, which began broadcasting in July of 1997. In spite of signs that pointed toward a decline, V-Cinema in the latter half of the 1990s was still very much an industry hard at work on making a profit. Interestingly, all this industrious and commercially minded activity in ‘one of the most reductively business oriented sections of the Japanese film industry’ (Zahlten 2007: 324) paradoxically also favored the gradual emergence of new artistic talent.

Discourse on V-Cinema

While coverage of V-Cinema in the general film press became an increasingly rare phenomenon over the course of the 1990s, academic discourse on the topic is even rarer and has remained limited to the writings of Higashi (2002) and Zahlten (2007). Although Zahlten’s later work makes no reference to Higashi’s paper, both scholars make a pivotal point of V-Cinema’s harkening back to

successful film genres and subgenres of the past: Nikkatsu borderless action, Toei's *ninkyō* and *jitsuroku* yakuza films, action movies from Toei Central Film, pink films, youth films, and *shomin geki*. They also reach similar conclusions as to how V-Cinema re-appropriated these generic models: Zahlten sees them as 'reenactments' with an almost parodic 'exaggerated syntax of gender and simulated [genre] spaces' (2007: 386); Higashi argues that V-Cinema 'dissolves' the substance of these past genres and only retains their form, which it replays as 'excess' (2002: 179). One could read an implied judgment of inferiority into their arguments, were it not for the fact that many of these generic models were themselves already more form than substance: repetition and variation are, as Barry Keith Grant points out, defining elements of genre cinema (Grant 2007: 1). On the basis of this repetition of forms, Higashi draws an analogy between the V-Cinema production model and the program pictures of the studio era (roughly 1951-1971). Yomota Inuhiko defines program pictures as 'films mass produced to fill up the exhibition programs of theaters that have a block booking contract with a producer/distributor' (Yomota 2003: 89).[39] While it seems odd to apply a term so intimately connected with theatrical exhibition practices to a production/distribution model specifically tailored for a different medium, the comparison dates back to long before Higashi. In fact, it has persisted from the earliest discussions of V-Cinema in the Japanese film press up to the present day, and constitutes one of the paradigms for discourse

[39] One notes the similarity between this definition and Sharp's description of Toei Central Film above.

on V-Cinema. Along the way, however, the central point of this paradigm shifted: from finding similarities in the models of production/distribution between program pictures and V-Cinema to a comparison of the effects that working within these models had on the filmmakers, or the 'sometimes overwhelming conditions [that] nonetheless provided many opportunities for filmmakers to develop their talent and hone their craft.' (Yomota 2003: 89)

It was film critic Yamane Sadao who initially made the analogy with the program pictures, in a May 1990 article on V-Cinema in the pages of *Kinema Junpō*.[40] He employed the comparison as the premise for his appraisal of 'the sudden emergence of V-Cinema' (Yamane 1993: 58) and for his consideration of its potential. Specifically, Yamane's model of a program picture production outfit is Second Toei (Daini Tōei), later renamed New Toei (Nyū Tōei), which made medium-length films often intended for release as B-pictures on double bills.[41] These formed a testing ground for new directors and first-time lead actors, such as the pairing of Fukasaku Kinji and Chiba Shinichi for *Wandering Detective: Tragedy in Red Valley* (*Fūraibō tantei akai tani no sangeki*, 1961). Yamane draws the comparison on the basis of

[40] This article was reprinted in Yamane 1993.

[41] The term 'program picture' or 'programmer' dates back to 1920s Hollywood. Whereas in U.S. discourse it was superseded by the term 'B-movie' after companies began releasing these as the lower rung of double bills, the term *puroguramu pikuchā* has remained in common use in Japanese film terminology, whether the films were released on double bills or not. The Japanese equivalent of the term B-movie is *B-kyū eiga* ('B-level films').

the Toei brand and the films' running times, which were usually around sixty minutes, the same as *Crime Hunter* two decades later. We have already seen that Toei Video soon abandoned medium-length running times for V-Cinema productions in favor of more conventional feature lengths. However, by focusing on this particular characteristic, Yamane also implies V-Cinema's position in the continuum of earlier short- to medium-length works released on the video market, when he describes V-Cinema productions as having a running time of '50 to 80 minutes'. None of the early V-Cinema titles, from Toei or other companies, were under 60 minutes in length, but earlier experiments in direct-to-video releasing during the 'age of confusion,' such as the *Guinea Pig* (*Ginīpiggu*, 1985-1990) series of splatter horror films, did have running times of around 50 minutes. And as previously noted, short and medium-length works were such a common element during the early years of rental video in Japan that stores carried separate pricing categories for them.

While Yamane does not mention this, New Toei's program pictures and V-Cinema works shared an additional characteristic: both were almost habitually serialized, mostly limited to one or two sequels, with installments often filmed back-to-back as a single production, then released separately with short intervals. Similar characteristics can be traced back further to an earlier model of Toei program picture production from the years following the studio's founding in 1951, when it released 40- to 50-minute genre films under the brand name "Toei Entertainment Edition" (*Tōei gorakuban*), such as *An Actor's Revenge* (*Yukinojo henge*, 1954, dir: Kōno Toshikazu,

1954, three installments) and *Fuefuki Doji* (*Fuefuki Dōji*, 1954, dir: Hagiwara Ryō, three installments).

Yamane's focus on a 'revival of the program picture' and his critical celebration of the 'potential of V-Cinema' (1993: 59) carries an auteurist overtone, spotlighting the V-Cinema works of various already established directors who had a history of critical notice or even auteur status, primarily those who had labored in program pictures during the 1960s, such as Kudō Eiichi, Ishii Teruo, and Hasebe Yasuharu. Yamane's essay reflects the circumstances of the first, Toei-dominated phase of V-Cinema during which it was written, in which it was not uncommon to find reputed names either in front of or behind the camera. Indeed, Yamane's writing exudes a sense of excitement and anticipation over what this new form of program picture might become, and he foresees an 'inevitable' (1993: 68) improvement in quality through an increase in quantity, particularly once V-Cinema starts to diversify and also target young female viewers.

The second enduring paradigm of discourse on V-Cinema is its characterization as 'a thing that is neither film nor television' – which was the subtitle of a four-page profile on Toei V-Cinema and producer Yoshida Tatsu in the October 1990 issue of film monthly *Shinario* (Scenario). This notion positioned V-Cinema as possessing a specific set of requirements and expressions in comparison to the two older platforms for audiovisual narrative fiction. Yamane too made this observation in his *Kinema Junpō* article of that same year, when he quoted director Kudō Eiichi as saying:

> ‘In TV drama we must follow the logic that the story needs to be understood by 80-90 percent of Japanese citizens. This is a very strict rule. V-Cinema has no such rule and directors are not asked to make a work that fits 90 percent of Japanese citizens. Therefore, the works have broader possibility.’
> (Kudō quoted in Yamane 1993: 62)

This discourse argues that it is in the differences in production methods from television and theatrical film that V-Cinema finds not only its formal singularity but also its perceived artistic potential. It acknowledges V-Cinema’s inherently marginal nature, but posits that this is what allows filmmakers greater creative leeway. In the earliest examples of discourse, V-Cinema had its own relevance built into it by commentators, who located this relevance in the very newness of the medium of home video.[42]

As V-Cinema entered its second phase of diversification, Yamane’s hope for a broader scope of genres and audiences came to be, and the various annual film yearbooks, such as the *Kinema Junpō Iyabukku*, duly began reporting on V-Cinema’s output. Yet what precisely the relevance is at which these commentators previously alluded, they appeared unable to make clear. While Yamane expresses the hope that a new type of film director will emerge who will ‘create a particular way of shooting for direct-to-video’

[42] In the light of this perceived contrast between television and the ‘revived’ program picture called V-Cinema, it is worth pointing out that New Toei was originally founded as a production company for television content.

(1993: 68), in a follow-up article from 1991 he never manages to articulate what the specific appeal of V-Cinema is, just that it is 'thrilling' (*suriringu*) and 'incomprehensibly intriguing' (*etai no shirenai omoshirosa*) (Yamane 1993: 146).

As V-Cinema moved into its third phase, this absence of a clear critical dialogue looks to have hindered its acceptance into mainstream film discourse. As V-Cinema, in terms of both film form and marketing, settled into 'excessive' generic templates of guns, girls, and gambling during the mid-1990s, it began to disappear from the film press and its yearbooks, due, according to Zahlten, to 'its image as a vulgar, artistically underwhelming product, churned out for quantity rather than quality.' (2007: 325) At the same time, however, a different spectrum of the press began to embrace this very vulgarity, exemplified by the fannish concept of the "V-Cinema Queen" (*bui shine kuīn*). Fujiki identifies this discourse as belonging squarely to the third phase, defining a "V-Cinema Queen" as: 'From the mid-1990s onward, a sexy actress who debuted in V-Cinema, worked mainly in V-Cinema, and flourished in the very special world of V-Cinema' (Mitsumoto et al. 2014: 215). Tanioka (1999: 99-106) emphasizes the informal nature of this discourse when he points out that there was more than one queen, and more than one way of 'electing' a queen: rental shop customers voted with their feet, expressing their 'real desire' for a specific actress by renting the movies she appeared in, as was the case with Ōtake Hitoe; at the same time the various female-centered subgenres of V-Cinema had their own queens, personifications of the stock character types that populated the erotic sector

of the market: the action heroine, the MILF or *jukujo*, the femme fatale. This discourse was played out in the national tabloid media, which consist chiefly of daily "sports" newspapers and *shūkanshi* weekly magazines, with their predominantly male readerships. These media participated in the promotional crossover between V-Cinema and the publication of erotic photo books, spotlighting the actresses in their pages, not unlike the "Page Three" girls of the British tabloid press. The popularization of V-Cinema as part of tabloid culture further contributed to the formation and diffusion of an image of V-Cinema as 'vulgar, mind-numbingly simplistic or uncompromisingly sensational' (Zahlten 2007: 326).

During this period and into the 2000s, the only film critic still regularly writing on V-Cinema was Tanioka Masaki, who doggedly continued to observe and chronicle its developments, even as he saw himself becoming increasingly estranged from the film press due to lack of editorial interest. Beginning in 1991 in the pages of cinephile monthly *Eiga Geijutsu* (Film Art), by the turn of the millennium Tanioka ended up publishing in a magazine for truckers, *Truck King*. In the intervening years he published several books on the topic, including a biography of star Aikawa Shō. The tone and scope of his writings befit the third phase and in spite of their undeniable insight they arguably contributed in an active way to forming and maintaining a certain image of V-Cinema: a strongly male focus emerges from his preference for certain genres over others and

from the chumminess often apparent in his tone of voice.[43]

More representative for the attitude of most Japanese film critics toward V-Cinema around this time was Kanehara Ichi's brief assessment in 2001 that there was 'no new activity' and that 'the usual lines are carried over' (2001: 362). Kanehara's text reads like the flipside to Yamane Sadao's essay from eleven years earlier, highlighting specific titles not for their appeal, but for their lack of originality, and underlining the increased proximity between V-Cinema and adult video in terms of subject matter and means of production. The overall decrease in V-Cinema production budgets was particularly noticeable in sex films, which formed an increasing, and increasingly impoverished, proportion of the overall output, thus 'enhancing discourses of inferiority and cheapness attached to V-Cinema.' (Zahlten 2007: 377)

Such discourses, however, were a reductive representation of what V-Cinema had become by the start of the 2000s, with little or no mention as yet of the role V-Cinema had been playing in the formation of new filmmaking talent, whose works were beginning to make their way into international festival and distribution around the same time. Writing in 2003, the year that Miike Takashi's Toei V-Cinema production *Gozu* played the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, scholar Yomota Inuhiko

[43] Tanioka's writings remain, however, invaluable sources of information and hard data on the topic that, as Zahlten emphasizes, might otherwise have been wiped from collective memory. They therefore should be the starting point for any research on V-Cinema, in particular Tanioka's 1999 book *V shinema damashii nisenbon no doshaburi o itsukushimi* ('V-Cinema Soul: Affection for a Downpour of 2000 Films').

makes no mention of V-Cinema when he explores 'where new directors [came] from after the 1980s' (Yomota 2003: 76). It must be noted, though, that this is also the moment that Higashi Takuma's paper on V-Cinema appeared in academic journal *Gendai Shisō*, which therefore went against the grain of both general discourse – which had abandoned V-Cinema – and academic discourse – which had never bothered with it in the first place. Higashi falls back on Yamane's early assessments of V-Cinema as the 'last gasp of the program picture type of popular cinema' (Higashi 2002: 178) and as existing 'somewhere' between television and theatrical films, but he extrapolates this to consider its possible status as a subculture – a term he employs to literally mean 'something that is not considered proper, decent culture' (Higashi 2002: 177), as compared to the 'high culture' of theatrical film and the official culture represented by nationwide broadcasters aiming at 'wholesome' family audiences (Higashi 2002: 177). He expands this argument by reasoning that V-Cinema, despite having the status of a subculture, never attained cult status or the form of *otaku* culture, as for example anime, which unlike V-Cinema is subject of discourse.[44] While it is undoubtedly true that there is no community of dedicated, obsessive fans of V-Cinema as a whole, elements of it have nevertheless been the subject of devoted cult fandom, notably specific actors and actresses, while a Google search for *Crime Hunter* reveals that this 'gun

[44] OVA enjoys cult status even outside Japan, witness for example Fred Patten's regular column about 'Forgotten Japanese OVAs' on the website *Cartoon Research*: http://cartoonresearch.com/index.php/forgotten-japanese-oavs-part-1/ [accessed September 9, 2016].

action' series is still today the object of veneration by replica firearms fanatics, both online and in the pages of such specialist magazines as *Gun Paradise*.

Such facts, however, further serve to underline V-Cinema's trivial position at the turn of the millennium, over a decade and more than 3000 films since its inception. This brings us back to Ramon Lobato's model of DTV: V-Cinema seems indeed to have one of the lowest discursive statuses among all sectors of Japan's cinematic output, but this is only the case if one adheres to the reductive view of V-Cinema long held by the Japanese film press, that of an industrially produced, excessive, vulgar, and artistically underwhelming product churned out for ever shadier sections of video rental stores. However, Yamane's vision that marginality would go hand in hand with creative leeway did materialize, under the radar of those involved in, and more so of those disinterested in, discourse on V-Cinema. While mainstream media were ignoring V-Cinema altogether, several proponents of this supposedly obscure industry were emerging onto a stage far more illustrious and far more cosmopolitan that the local video store. And this was in no small part due to qualities inherent in the V-Cinema production model.

II – Internationalization of V-Cinema

We have seen that the video rental market in Japan developed largely according to domestic criteria and experiences, from the divergently identified spaces of the Nagoya Video Library and the Toho Video Shop to the production model of made-for-television animation serials whose castoffs contributed to creating a structure for direct-to-video releasing. V-

Cinema represents a stage in this succession of developments, one that, with an initial profit model constructed around supplying the nation's network of video stores, was also entirely domestic in scope.

Paradoxically, transnationalism was inscribed into V-Cinema from its very beginning, in Yoshida Tatsu's formative attempt to redefine what a Japanese film ought to be on the basis of foreign yardsticks – an attempt embodied by the borderless style of *Crime Hunter* and later works, particularly those of Toei. Borderlessness, however – in addition to being adopted from an earlier paradigm of Japanese film production – functioned merely as an additive, an exotic spice or flavor to help the product stand out in the domestic marketplace. The core of the issue remained the identity of V-Cinema as *Japanese* cinema: when Toei V-Cinema borrowed characteristics from, for example, the action films of Sylvester Stallone, it did not do so in order to compete with the films of Stallone but in order to compete with other Japanese films.

Industry Processes

The V-Cinema industry's modest initiatives toward internationalization would remain almost entirely limited to this notion of adding spice – even if the nature of the spice and that of the main dish would gradually shift. Toei Video released the first works in its V-Erotica and V-America imprints in December of 1992 and these early releases carried their transnationalism on their sleeves – and in some cases, in their titles. *Manila Emmanuelle* parts 1 and 2 tell the story of a Japanese woman and her amorous adventures with several rich white expatriate businessmen in

The Philippines, while the first two V-America titles, *Distant Justice* (*Fukushū wa ore ga yaru*, dir: Murakawa Tōru, 1992) and *New York Undercover Cop* (*Nyū Yōku U koppu*, dir: Murakawa Tōru, 1993), both follow Japanese police detectives on revenge missions in the United States, which they carry out with the support of an American colleague [Figure14].

The writers and directors of these early transnational works were Japanese (director Murakawa Tōru was a veteran of Toei Central Films's action pictures). *Manila Emmanuelle* and its sequel were furthermore shot by a largely Japanese film crew, so that these films' transnationalism was merely the product of location shooting and thus amounted to little more than exoticism. By contrast, Toei set up the V-America films as co-productions with one or more local partners, so that the capital it invested in these more lavish-looking works was never more than the cost of a regular V-Cinema production.[45] Toei also initially released the V-America films on video in Japanese-dubbed versions, contributing to the impression that these were upgraded V-Cinema productions, rather than foreign films. (The films were shot mostly in English with an eye on release in foreign markets, as well as to facilitate the participation of American actors such as George Kennedy, David Carradine, and Mira Sorvino.) The gradual increase in the number of investment partners, however, lowered Toei's stake in later productions and thus its creative influence.[46] The third film it

[45] Interview with Ichise Takashige by Josh Johnson, Tokyo, May 2012.

[46] Although Toei staff, such as L.A.-based producer Ichise Takashige, often continued to provide the basic storyline proposal for each film.

Figure 13: Japanese rental VHS cover for *Distant Justice*

released under the V-America banner, *American Yakuza* (dir: Frank Cappello, 1993), was written and directed by Americans, while the protagonist too was no longer a Japanese abroad but a (white) citizen of the U.S.A. (an early role for Viggo Mortensen) – in this case, an ex-convict who saves the life of a yakuza boss and enters the Japanese crime syndicate as the kingpin's confidant.

Toei's Japanese video release of *American Yakuza* (under the title *Yakuza vs Mafia*) was still dubbed, but a shift was taking place in the company's marketing strategies for V-America, a shift that coincided with the start of the third phase of V-Cinema and the end of the period of experiments in diversification. The Japanese video release of the company's next American co-production, *Blue Tiger* (dir: Norberto Barba, 1994, starring Virginia Madsen) was subtitled rather than dubbed. It would also be the last title Toei released under the V-America imprint.[47] Subsequent films produced according to the same scheme, such as *No Way Back* (dir: Frank Cappello, 1995, starring Russell Crowe) and *Final Vendetta* (dir: René Eram, 1996), received a Japanese theatrical release before coming out under the general Toei Video banner, with box art that did its utmost to dissociate the film from anything identifiable as V-Cinema: the front cover of *No Way Back* proudly announced that

[47] Only two titles were ever released under Toei's V-World imprint, meant for thrillers shot in Australia: *Crime Broker* (dir: Ian Barry, 1993, starring Jacqueline Bisset) and *The Seventh Floor* (dir: Ian Barry, 1994, starring Brooke Shields). By 1994 Toei had also abandoned the V-Erotica label.

the film had been 'Released in 1,000 movie theaters in America'.[48]

During V-Cinema's second phase, a number of other companies mimicked Toei's transnational leanings, though the costly adventure of shooting in the U.S. rarely resulted in more than a single outing. This was the case with for example Japan Home Video's *Sunny Gets Blue* (*Sanī gettsu burū tsuigeki no kīuesuto*, dir: Ōkawa Toshimichi, 1993) or Pony Canyon's rather belated *Scorpion's Revenge* (*Sasori in USA*, dir: Gotō Daisuke, 1997). KSS allowed writer/director Harada Masato to film sections of the fifth installment of the *TUFF* series, *TUFF V: California Murder Anthology* (*Tafu Kariforunia koroshi no ansorojī*, 1992) in Los Angeles before co-producing a theatrical spin-off of the series shot entirely in the U.S.A., *Painted Desert* (*Peinteddo desāto Tafu gekijōban*, 1993). In the latter, the young Japanese hitman hero of the V-Cinema *TUFF* series wakes up as an amnesiac in the Nevada desert and is cared for by the Japanese-American owner of a roadside diner, who is in trouble with a local crime lord. On the Japanese side, KSS's production partners included Shochiku, which received the rights for domestic theatrical distribution, and satellite TV channel WOWOW, while two American production companies completed the partnership.[49]

[48] Toei co-productions such as *Crying Freeman* (dir: Christophe Gans, 1995), and *Fist of the North Star* (dir: Tony Randel, 1995) even dispensed with Japanese actors altogether – despite both being based on Japanese manga.

[49] As a former U.S.-based film critic and translator of American films for Japanese release, fluent English speaker Harada Masato was perhaps the likeliest

In spite of their transnational aspects, by nature these international co-productions largely followed the logic of a domestic distribution model, which sought to move a certain number of videotapes from company warehouses into video stores, while money moved in the opposite direction. The movies themselves fully adhered to established, recognizable genres – notably action movies, thrillers, and sex films – so that the final result was just another product for the video shelves, to be placed among other similar products and hopefully attracting the attention of rental store customers through its added "spice" – whether that spice consisted of American elements added to a supposedly Japanese film, or Japanese elements in a supposedly American film. Koichi Iwabuchi (2004: 6) notes that Japanese popular culture, in order to become a global culture, hides its "Japaneseness" by affiliating with Western media industries and localizing its products. The example he gives is the *Pokémon* franchise, whose various commodities are manufactured locally, under license from U.S.-based Pokémon Company International. Toei's localization efforts with the V-America titles[50] did not occur in a vacuum: the *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* TV series

Japanese film director to handle such a co-production. His 1989 Japanese-produced transnational SF action film *Gunhed* (1989) had already gotten him noted by a Hollywood agent, so that he had a network in place to facilitate co-production between Japanese and American partners. Outside of V-Cinema, Harada later made other attempts to shoot films in the U.S., notably the sports drama *Rowing Through* (1996). (Van Haute 2002: 49; Gatto 2001)

[50] Or delocalization, if we regard these within the context of their Japanese release.

is a localized version of the company's *Super Sentai* (*Sūpā sentai*) serial,[51] while Toei Animation's experience with export and localization date back to the late 1950s / early 1960s, with *Hakujaden* (1958, U.S. version: *Panda and the White Serpent*, 1961), *Shōnen Sarutobi Sasuke* (1959, U.S. version: *Magic Boy*, 1961), and Saiyūki (1960, U.S. version: *Alakazam the Great*, 1961).

In the end, however, the fact that the audience for the V-America films now included Americans and Europeans made no difference to the films' afterlife. The only fundamental distinction was one of scale: the Japanese companies involved in these co-productions had essentially gone from making V-Cinema to making American DTV, inheriting all the limitations the latter entails. The restricted artistic ambitions of the strategy meant the scale proved too large for these co-productions to make any sort of difference: regarded from a framework of canon formation, they are as inconsequential as any random, more typically domestic proponent of V-Cinema, their relevance limited to forming part of the before-they-were-famous tail ends of a few Hollywood star filmographies.

Gatekeeping Processes: Festivals

Where the industry processes of internationalizing V-Cinema sought to reduce or hide national and cultural identity as part of a strategy for global distribution, the gatekeeping processes taking place around the same time arguably emphasized national

[51] The *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* debuted on American TV in 1993, the same year Toei stepped up localization efforts on V-America. See Desser 2003: 194-197.

and cultural identity as a means toward achieving the same end. As noted in chapter 2, the rise of film festivals in the Asia-Pacific region (including notably Hawai'i, Hong Kong, and Busan) contributed to a central presence for Asian, specifically East Asian, cinemas in what de Valck has described as a third phase in the development of international film festivals. As Nornes details (2014: 249), Western programmers increasingly ventured out into Asia, with these festivals serving as their guides and keepers of the gates to regional film production. This dedicated search for regional output largely resulted from a need for distinction: as the number of festivals proliferated and the "film festival circuit" came into existence – a network in which festivals served as scouting grounds for other festivals – specialization became a means for the more recent arrivals on the festival scene to set themselves apart, as well as to avoid having to compete with established events. As we have seen, during the 1980s and the 1990s "new national cinemas" from Asia followed each other in such rapid succession that they virtually blurred into a single "new Asian cinema" in the eyes of Western observers. This continental perspective was a development that was quite unprecedented and that went beyond Thomas Elsaesser's observation of the mechanics of film festival selection and classification that 'one author is a "discovery", two are the auspicious signs that announce a "new wave", and three new authors from the same country amount to a "new national cinema".' (Elsaesser 2005: 99)

In this carrousel of East Asian cinemas, Japan inevitably received its due. There certainly was a deep enough well for festival programmers to draw from; although

official statistics showed a decline in production, the all-time low reached in 1991 still encompassed 230 new releases.[52] By nature of the game, only a small selection was ultimately "discovered" by (mainly) European programmers. Tsukamoto Shinya and Kitano Takeshi were among the first new names from Japan to break into the international festival circuit in the early 1990s, the former with a grand prize for his debut feature *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (*Tetsuo*, 1989) at the FantaFestival in Rome and the latter with the selection of *Sonatine* (*Sonachine*, 1993) for the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes. A retrospective – the confirmation of a filmmaker's auteur status, according to Elsaesser – of the four films Kitano had made up until that point followed at the London Film Festival in 1994, while Tsukamoto's subsequent works continued to win prizes at Europe's various specialist genre film festivals in addition to screening at generalist fests such as Rotterdam, Turin, and London. The 1997 edition of the Venice festival further underlined the centrality of these two figures in film festivals' mediation of 1990s Japanese cinema: Kitano won the Golden Lion for *Fireworks* (*Hana-bi*), a prize bestowed upon him by a jury whose members included Tsukamoto (Mes 2005: 143). De Valck (2007: 127) mentions mediation as one of the three steps (in addition to selection and classification) in festivals' value-adding process, a dynamic exchange between the festivals and the press that shapes cinephilic

[52] Source: Motion Picture Producers of Japan, Inc., http://www.eiren.org/statistics_e/ [accessed: October 19, 2016]. This number does not take direct-to-video releases into account, which means that the actual number of newly released Japanese films that year, all formats confounded, would have been well over 300.

and popular discourse on cinema. This creates discourses that do not necessarily exist at the films' point of origin: Kitano is a case in point that adheres to E. Ann Kaplan's notion that foreign critics may uncover meanings in a film that critics from the culture from which it sprung may not.[53] As has often been pointed out, although Kitano is a household name in Japan as a comedian and media personality, his works as a film director have long held a marginal position in Japanese film discourse, neither commercial successes nor sources for auteurist debate. This marginal position holds equally for the festival 'discoveries' that followed in the wake of Kitano and Tsukamoto. Throughout the late 1990s, a string of Japanese filmmakers emerged at Western film festivals, including Aoyama Shinji, Koreeda Hirokazu, Kawase Naomi, Kobayashi Masahiro, and Kurosawa Kiyoshi, which set into motion a branding of this "new national cinema" – one that the parties involved in this discourse could not entirely dissociate from Japan's "old national cinema," as witnessed by the coining of the term 'New New Wave'.[54]

[53] Kaplan 1991: 7

[54] Stephens 2001; Chaudhuri 2005: 105-108. Stephens writes: 'As teeming with creativity as it was during the 1960s new wave, contemporary Japanese cinema continues its decades long status as a garden of earthly and deliciously ungodly delights. Unlike the old days, Japanese filmmakers today know they're not just making films for Japanese audiences anymore, and that — thanks largely to the international success of Takeshi Kitano — they won't have to wait 20 years for the rest of the world to catch up.'
Chuck Stephens, "Japan's New New Wave", *LA Weekly*, July 25, 2001, http://www.laweekly.com/film/japans-new-new-wave-2133640 [accessed October 12, 2016].

The centrality of science fiction in the works of Tsukamoto and of the yakuza genre in those of Kitano demonstrates that festivals, during their third phase, were not averse to popular genres. As David Bordwell notes: 'Film programmers had found that in the age of videotape they could no longer attract audiences with Buñuel and Resnais.' (2011: 54-55). On the one hand, festivals' proven accrual of cultural capital meant that their selections met with a more open reception, giving programmers freedom to venture into and embrace genre cinema. De Valck qualifies third-stage festivals as 'flirtatious encounters between art and entertainment' (de Valck 2007: 130). However, the entertainment she refers to is of the Hollywood kind, the sort of films whose presence benefit a large-scale media event such as a film festival because they come accompanied by a parade of big-name stars on the red carpet. As regards Japanese genre works, though made as popular commercial films, festivals arguably recontextualized them by presenting them as art, and their directors (rarely if ever was the focus on the stars) as auteurs. Cases in point are the 'Pink Pictures from Japan' program of erotic films at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 1995, or the Mochizuki Rokurō retrospective at the same event in 1998. Some generalist festivals did resort to adding

The fact that, only a few months before Kitano's Golden Lion, Imamura Shōhei had won his second Palme d'or in Cannes for *The Eel* (*Unagi*) – a film that features a number of actors who were also regulars in the films of Kitano and Tsukamoto – and Kawase Naomi was awarded the Camera d'or at the same festival for her debut feature *Suzaku* (*Moe no suzaku*, 1997) may have helped to create the perception of a more or less direct lineage between the "old" New Wave and the new one.

dedicated sections to their programs specifically devoted to showcasing popular genre works, such as the Midnight Madness section at the Toronto International Film Festival (since 1988), while other festivals devoted themselves exclusively to this niche, in particular "fantastic film festivals" such as those in Brussels, Sitges, or Montreal, as a means of distinction. The latter form almost isolated circuits within, or below, the festival circuit, influencing each other, but rarely the wider network of generalist film festivals.[55]

Herbert Gans (1999: 102) points out that foreign film was primarily the reserve of high culture.[56] The inclusion of popular genre movies into this category, their acknowledgement as legitimate "foreign cinema" by the festival elite, was an adjustment in the process of gatekeeping, and therefore of canon formation, that did not pass without censure. Writing for *The New York Times* in March 2005, in response to Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (*Oldeuboi*, 2004) winning the Grand Jury Prize at the previous year's Cannes Film Festival,

[55] Abé Mark Nornes has suggested the term 'short circuit' for such smaller networks of, often regional, festivals that operate to the overall indifference of the generalist European and American events. (Nornes 2014)

[56] At least in subtitled form, as Tessa Dwyer specifies: 'In the United States, as in other Anglophone countries [...] subtitling tends to be equated with the art house circuit, and dubbing with popular fare, such as animation, action, and exploitation'. (Dwyer 2014: 48) See also: Nornes 2007. This distinction does not hold for countries in which subtitling is the norm for all foreign cinema, Hollywood film included, where dubbing tends to be reserved for programming aimed at children. It ceases to exist entirely in countries where dubbing is the norm.

film critic Manohla Dargis sarcastically spoke of 'the new, improved Cannes, baby - fast and furious and genre-friendly.' She opined:

> '[Park]'s success in the international arena, his integration into the upper tier of the festival circuit and his embrace by some cinephiles [...] reflect a dubious development in recent cinema: the mainstreaming of exploitation. Movies that were once relegated to midnight screenings at festivals – and, in an earlier age, grindhouses like those that once enlivened Times Square – are now part of the main event.'
> (Dargis 2005)

Dargis sees a danger in the ascension of this and other 'extreme films' (a definition in which she also includes works by Miike Takashi, as well as French filmmakers Gaspar Noé and Catherine Breillat) to the 'upper tier' of film festivals. Her warning against these films' pernicious influence on the festival mainstream is an echo of the age-old cautions against the threats of mass culture, as defined by Gans.[57] De Valck argues that applying a rigid distinction between high and low culture with regards to festivals is to overlook the role of mediation in festivals' value-adding function, as 'everybody and everything has the chance to gain symbolic value at film festivals through media attention, because journalists and critics are purposefully on the lookout for input that

[57] Gans (1999: 29) describes the critique of mass culture as revolving around four themes: the negative character of popular culture creation; the negative effects on high culture; the negative effects on the popular culture audience; the negative effects on the society.

may translate into newsworthy items.' (De Valck 2007: 128) Dargis appears to reason as if film festivals had remained stuck in their second phase, with their main role limited to seeking out and championing artistic excellence.[58]

Leaving aside the question of whether or not there exists a 'dubious development' of 'mainstreaming exploitation', for our purposes the case illustrates how the transformations of film festivals during the third phase paved the way for V-Cinema and its proponents to gain entrance to the global film discourse. From a technical standpoint, these opportunities for (Asian) genre films at festivals should have had no effect on V-Cinema at all: since V-Cinema productions were only released on video, no film prints were made, even though the majority of productions were in fact shot on film (mostly some form of 16mm). Yet, however paradoxical it may sound, theatrical releasing of V-Cinema titles is a practice almost as old as V-Cinema itself. Nikkatsu, for example, released the aforementioned *Anxious Virgin: One More Time, I Love You* into theaters on October 26, 1990. Though released on video under the company's "V-Feature" label, the film was independently produced by New Century Producers, an outfit whose involvement in filmmaking predates V-Cinema and which most notably produced

[58] To some extent, though, de Valck's argumentation supports Dargis's reading, when she contends that access to competitions and prizes is still 'reserved for a select group of filmmakers and films'. Dargis's argument is after all founded on *Oldboy*'s inclusion among the award-winning elite at Cannes. However, since an active search for the "new" is part and parcel of film festivals' functions and activities, this 'select group' cannot be rigid or static and must gradually allow "new" names entry in order to remain relevant.

Itami Jūzō's 1985 comedy *Tampopo* (*Tanpopo*). After Daiei launched its V-Cinema label Shin Eiga Tengoku ("New Film Heaven") in 1991 with *Dance till Tomorrow*, it consistently gave the movies it brought out under this banner a theatrical release.[59] Other companies in the field, such as KSS and Hero, who would not initially have had the wherewithal or infrastructure to handle theatrical exhibition, eventually did resort to limited theatrical releases (often even limited to a single week on a single screen in Tokyo or Osaka[60]) from 1994 onward. These functioned as a means of promotion and to help the films stand out in what was by then becoming an overcrowded V-Cinema market: it allowed the video maker to mention 'Theatrically Released Feature Film' (*Gekijō kōkai sakuhin*) on the box cover, or even 'National Theatrical Release' (*Zenkoku kōkai*) – an intentionally overstated way of saying the film had been released in Tokyo as well as Osaka. (Zahlten 2007: 370) Such mentions are meant to bestow added value on the product, to function as a hallmark that distinguishes the film from a supposedly inferior glut of "cheap" direct-to-video fare.

The increasing adoption of a theatrical release strategy by V-Cinema production companies had a number of consequences

[59] According to Shimoda Atsuyuki of production company Twins, which often worked with Daiei, the company's history as a film studio informed its release strategies in V-Cinema: 'As a film studio they had always made theatrical films, so it was kind of in their DNA to also show a film like this theatrically.' (Mes, Shimoda interview 2014). It is notable in this regard that Daiei's chosen brand name "Shin Eiga Tengoku" eschewed any reference to the word video.

[60] See Miike 2003: 208.

that would prove crucial in allowing V-Cinema to outgrow its initial, strictly domestic scope. Firstly, the practical need for manufacturing one or more 35mm film prints of a given title demanded an increase in budget – for post-production at first, but as the context of V-Cinema releasing shifted from competing on video shelves to making an impact on the big screen, production too benefited from additional means, thus making the previously implied contrast with "cheap" direct-to-video production an effective distinction.[61] Secondly, the existence of a 35mm print meant that a film could potentially be screened at film festivals. Though initial festival exposure was limited to the domestic 'short circuit',[62] a select number of Western festivals and programmers with established networks in Asia swiftly caught on. British film critic, programmer and curator Tony Rayns, for instance, was an early supporter of both Tsukamoto Shinya's and Kitano Takeshi's works (he had been behind the 1994 four-film Kitano retrospective in London) and was later responsible for the selection of Mochizuki Rokurō's *Another Lonely Hitman* (*Shin kanashiki hittoman*, 1995) at the Rotterdam film festival in 1996, as well as the retrospective the festival devoted to Mochizuki two years later. The Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival screened director Miike

[61] The profit model was still calculated on the basis of video releases, however, with the theatrical run effectively functioning as advertising for the video.

[62] For example, the 1995 Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival screening of *Forever With You* (*Kimi to itsu made mo*), a film directed by Hiroki Ryūichi and released on video as a Nikkatsu V-Feature later that same year (the video box cover mentions the festival selection).

Takashi's *Fudoh: The New Generation* (*Gokudō sengokushi Fudō*, 1996) in early 1997, after which the film went on to screen at the Fantasia Festival in Montreal and in the Midnight Madness section of the Toronto International Film Festival that same year.

However, this sudden interest from festivals and subsequent international exposure was not simply a matter of "if you build it, they will come." As a foreign programmer, one would have had to be terribly well informed to know about a direct-to-video market that had by the mid-1990s all but disappeared from Japanese film discourse. A one-week screening at a single theater in Osaka was not likely to place a film on a foreign programmer's radar. The existence of film prints may have made foreign festival screenings technically possible, but the realization was the result of the conscious efforts of individuals – firstly a number of those within the V-Cinema production sector who used the opportunities and the leeway of this 'unstable and chaotic'[63] system to achieve more ambitious goals than a spot on a rental store shelf. Chiba Yoshinori of Gaga Communications was producer of both *Another Lonely Hitman* and *Fudoh: The New Generation*. Several years before, his first work as a producer, the science fiction film *Zeiram* (*Zeiramu*, dir: Amemiya Keita, 1991), was also Gaga Communications' first V-Cinema release. It went on to become one of the first V-Cinema works to receive foreign video distribution, in an English-dubbed edition by Fox Lorber in 1994 [Figure 15], in part because Chiba had allowed the film to run over budget, so as to accommodate elaborate special effects work,

[63] Mes, Shimoda interview 2014

Figure 14: Front covers of the American (1994, left) and German (1995) VHS releases of *Zeiram*

which made the film attractive to buyers outside Japan. With *Fudoh*, Chiba similarly had an ambitious vision of the film's potential. While *Another Lonely Hitman* had been made with theatrical release in mind, this was not the case for *Fudoh*. Yet, Chiba felt Miike's film deserved better than a straight-to-video release. In an industry where a producer 'was able to get a film made on the basis of a piece of paper with an idea just jotted down on it [...], handwritten',[64] such informal business practices could be turned to the advantage of one who recognized the opportunities. As Chiba remembers:

> 'I was watching the rushes [of *Fudoh*] and I was blown away by how good they were. It was even better than I hoped it would be. Back then, all straight-to-video films were still shot on film, but they rarely made 35mm prints, because there was no need for them. They went directly to video, so all they made was a video master tape. But *Fudoh* was coming out so good - good enough to play on the big screen - that I decided to have a print made. There was no room for this in the budget Gaga had given me, so I tricked them into giving me more money. The Tokyo Film Festival has a fantasy film sub-festival. I told my bosses that *Fudoh* had been selected for the festival and that we needed to make a 35mm print. I was lying of course.'
> (Mes 2006)

[64] Ibid.

The changing media landscape of the video era also resulted in the emergence of new gatekeepers who moved into the informant role previously filled by the Kawakitas. A notable example in this regard is Aihara Hiromi, who had worked at cultural listings magazine Pia and at video distributor F2 during the 1980s. Her involvement with the early films of Tsukamoto Shinya (F2 had released *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* on video in Japan and Aihara would go on to work on *Tetsuo II: The Body Hammer*), combined with her fluency in English, led her to taking up the role of international representative for Tsukamoto. This in turn resulted in close associations with Tony Rayns as well as with a number of festivals on the fantasy short circuit, such as Brussels and Fantasia – for which Aihara served as the key informant in the selection of *Fudoh*. Global developments in film festivals and concurrent permutations in the domestic film production scene thus overlapped to rearrange the gatekeeping infrastructure.

However, as both Elsaesser (2005: 97) and de Valck (2007: 128) emphasize, a festival selection is not an end unto itself: the festival's value-adding function allows a film access to critical discourse and can lead to foreign sales and distribution, potentially bringing it to a much wider international audience. This is where the cultural capital a film obtains in the value-adding environment of the festival transforms into economic capital.[65]

[65] Film festivals' mediating role in the transformation of films into commodities can also be a more directly facilitating one, if the festival encompasses a film market event such as the *Marché du film* at Cannes. Lobato (2012: 27), de Valck (2007: 96), and others emphasize how the rapid expansion of the video business and

Gatekeeping Processes: Distribution

When studying the distribution of Asian and Japanese genre cinema in Western countries after 1989, and how this was informed by the festival circuit, the U.K. provides for a useful example. London's 'taste-making' (Hoad 2013) Institute of Contemporary Arts, for instance, provided curated programs of films discovered at festivals around the world, but also theatrical and video distribution through its distribution arm ICA Projects. In this manner, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* received a theatrical release from ICA Projects in the U.K. in 1991, after being included in a program of recent Japanese films screened at the Institute during October and November of 1990. (The same distributor was even quicker to pick up *Sonatine*, releasing it in British theaters in 1993, the same year the film premiered in Cannes.) Also in 1991, ICA Projects, in partnership with video distributor Island World Communications, handled the British release of *Akira*, Ōtomo Katsuhiro's epic animated science-fiction feature. *Akira* had received its international premiere in the fantasy short circuit in July of 1988,[66] before having additional value bestowed upon it through a selection for the Berlin Film Festival's Forum section in February of the following year. Its release in the West was 'almost singlehandedly responsible for the early 1990s boom in anime in the English language' (Clements & McCarthy 2006: 13), a boom that was nurtured greatly by Island World Communications' decision, in the

subsequent new forms of film financing such a pre-sales served to bolster these film markets during the 1980s.

[66] Fantasporto Festival in Portugal on July 17, 1988, one day after the film's theatrical premiere in Japan.

immediate wake of the *Akira* release, to found the Manga Entertainment imprint.
Manga Entertainment was dedicated to releasing Japanese animation on video, features as well as serials originally released as OVA in Japan, mostly in English dubbed versions. Building on the success of *Akira*, the selection of titles was largely skewed toward the SF and fantasy genres and toward constructing an image of manga / anime[67] as 'violent, abrasive, radically stylised, thoughtful and above all, adult' (Hoad 2013), with analogous subject matter and an emphasis on action, violence, and sexual and horrific scenes.[68]

A similar process of recontextualization was also at the basis of Manga Entertainment's launch of the Manga Live label, which specialized in releasing live-action Japanese genre films, with a preference for SF themes befitting the generic mold created by the release of *Akira*. Here, the company not only continued to search out titles that fit the image it had manufactured of Japanese popular culture, it further sought to recontextualize otherwise unrelated films as somehow "manga-esque", based on genrification (through a limited focus on SF

[67] Largely due to the naming of the label, the two terms were used interchangeably in initial discourse, though strictly the former denotes printed comic books and the latter animated cartoons. Anime is often based on manga, but certainly not in all cases.

[68] In a 1999 press release, Manga Entertainment described itself as 'developers of supernatural horror, science fiction, high-tech mecha-designs and futuristic fantasy'. (PR Newswire, 1999)

and fantasy) and rather nebulous notions about comparable aesthetics. Manga Live re-released *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* in 1993, along with its sequel *Tetsuo II: The Body Hammer*. The following year it released Harada Masato's SF film *Gunhed* (*Ganheddo*, 1989), followed by *Zeiram* in 1995. None of these filmed had origins in manga or anime.

While the two *Tetsuo* films had already been released theatrically and on video – and had gained critical notice – in subtitled form, the latter two releases featured English-dubbed versions produced in the United States, conforming to Tessa Dwyer's observation that dubbing is employed primarily for popular fare and exploitation films. This paradoxical combination of exoticized and localized (i.e. promoted for its Japaneseness, yet dubbed into English[69]) formed the blueprint for Manga Entertainment's early marketing strategy – a strategy chosen at least in part for pragmatic reasons: the existence of an 'archive' of English subtitled and dubbed versions produced for the US market by similarly anime-centered distributors such as Streamline Pictures (founded in 1988), Central Park Media (in 1990), and AD Vision (in 1992). (Clements 2013: 181) Manga Entertainment partially abandoned the practice of dubbing as Japanese animation gained a loyal following, and thus a niche market potential, that had not existed before the release of *Akira* – and which Manga Entertainment's releases had done much to cultivate.

[69] Often in a rather liberal translation, adapted to fit whatever censorship rating the distributor was aiming for. See Clements 2009: 274.

A number of Manga Entertainment's marketing and branding strategies were adopted a decade later for the promotion of Asia Extreme, a home video imprint launched in 2001 by U.K.-based distributor Tartan Films, a company focused primarily on the art house market. The label released a variety of films from East and South East Asia (including Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand), with a strong emphasis on the genres of horror and action, and, in marketing, on the sensational and transgressive content supposedly on offer. Filmmakers, titles, and genres from Japan included several proponents of V-Cinema, such as Nakata Hideo, Miike Takashi, and Kurosawa Kiyoshi. Asia Extreme forms a fascinating paradigm of gatekeeping and canonization. Chi-Yun Shin (2009: 85) argues that the brand has played a key role in promoting and disseminating East Asian films in the West, and one could add it was equally instrumental in shaping the discourse surrounding them. The venture initially enjoyed tremendous commercial success: by spring 2005, almost a third of Tartan's entire catalogue consisted of Asia Extreme titles. (Dew 2007: 54) In response, several other U.K. distribution companies established Asian genre cinema imprints, with such names as Optimum Asia, Premier Asia, and Momentum Asia.[70]

By the time of Asia Extreme's unveiling, the home video market at large had almost entirely abandoned the VHS cassette and switched to DVD, the digital disc format launched in 1997. DVD was, as Klinger,

[70] The trend found followers outside the U.K. as well: DVD distributors in the Netherlands, for example, launched such labels as Mo'Asia, Asian Fanatics, and Asiamania.

McDonald, and Herbert all point out,[71] significantly cheaper to produce than VHS cassettes, resulting in lower retail prices yet higher profit margins for studios and distributors – a situation that worked in favor of developing a sell-through market rather than one for rental.[72] Tartan founder and CEO Hamish McAlpine called DVD 'the motor that drives our industry' (Mottesheard 2005) and as we will see, Tartan's Asia Extreme releases were firmly a product of the DVD age: branded as a new kind of film for a new kind of medium, a collectable commodity, recognizably packaged and sold at one's local chain retailer, where it was neatly stocked in its own easy-to-locate section.[73] The swift and widespread adoption of DVD as both a sell-through and a

[71] McDonald 2007: 55-57; Klinger 2006: 58-60; Herbert 2014: 39-43.

[72] A noteworthy precedent to the retail model of DVD is the Video CD (VCD), a format whose success has mostly been in East Asia (minus Japan), particularly in China, and in developing countries. Image and sound quality are noticeably inferior to DVD, but the discs are also much cheaper to produce: about 1/10th of the cost of manufacturing a DVD. In Hong Kong, VCD caught on in the early to mid-1990s, thanks to the popularity of serialized Japanese TV dramas releases. A good number of V-Cinema titles, such as the *Zero Woman* series, were also released on Hong Kong VCD during this period. For a detailed study on the practice and impact of VCD, see: Davis 2003.

[73] Before DVD and Asia Extreme, European and North American labels such as Tokyo Shock, Japan Shock Video, and Forbidden Asia had, as their names indicate, operated with a comparable curatorial philosophy, but on a much more modest scale of distribution.

rental medium[74] facilitated the spread of films from the festival circuit to a wider audience. In her criticism of Manohla Dargis' editorial outburst regarding 'extreme cinema', Joan Hawkins invokes Bourdieu by pointing out that not everyone has equal access to festival culture. She argues instead that if a trend toward the 'mainstreaming of exploitation' did indeed exist, it was happening 'at the level of DVD sales [...] and in shopping mall bookstore/DVD chain outlets' (Hawkins 2009) – in other words, in the domain where Tartan Asia Extreme made its mark and most of its profits.[75] McAlpine already hinted at Hawkins' observation in a 2002 interview with the trade journal *Variety*, in which he noted that the audience for Asia Extreme titles does not always have access to art house cinemas, and even when they do, they do not encounter something that caters to their taste, finding 'Italian soppy, weepy, romantic comedies rather than the more ballsy cinema that's out there.' (Mottesheard 2005) That this audience existed was clear: by 2006 ten out of Tartan's twenty bestselling DVD releases were Asia Extreme titles. (Shin 2009: 92) Oliver Dew (2007: 57) describes that the Asia Extreme releases were positioned in their own category within the layout of HMV's Oxford Street store in London. Between 2003 and 2005, Tartan also organized an annual "Asia Extreme

[74] The number of weekly DVD rentals overtook weekly tape rentals for the first time in June 2003. (Greenberg 2008: 152)

[75] It should be pointed out that Tartan went bankrupt in 2008, a year before Hawkins published this piece and not long after the label entered the U.S. market. It is an indication, though, that Asia Extreme's influence on discourse continued after its demise.

Roadshow," which toured around U.K. multiplex cinemas, rather than the art houses that traditionally screened foreign-language films.

Chi-Yun Shin notes 'the problematic ways in which Tartan canonizes [...] disparate East Asian film titles under the Asia Extreme banner.' (Shin 2009: 87) Indeed, the topic has not passed unnoticed among scholars, who have devoted numerous articles and even a full book[76] to Tartan's activities and their implications. In 2006, Gary Needham criticized the provocatively named imprint for recontextualizing the films through its marketing and thereby contributing to placing new Japanese cinema within 'discourses of excess, difference and transgression.' (Needham 2006: 9) Needham drew a parallel between such emphasizing of 'exotic and dangerous cinematic thrills' and the yellow peril figures of turn-of-the-century adventure stories, both serving to construct a narrative of the Asian as a cruel 'dangerous Other'. (Ibid.) Needham's critique in turn influenced a number of other scholars who investigated Asia Extreme along similar lines, more often than not with reference to Edward Said's *Orientalism*: Oliver Dew, in examining Tartan and other companies' efforts at marketing and promoting their rosters as 'the weird, the wonderful and the dangerous'[77] and the subsequent media reception, arrives at a comparable critique of Orientalist intent: 'The

[76] Daniel Martin, *Extreme Asia: The Rise of Cult Cinema from the Far East*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015

[77] A recurring tagline in Tartan Asia Extreme promotional material.

apparently transgressive nature of these titles is often discussed as if it is an integral part of the film text, or worse of Japanese culture itself, rather than being at least partly located in the way in which the films are marketed and consumed in Britain.' (Dew 2007: 69-70) [Figure 16]

The way these Asian films were promoted for release in Europe and North America on the basis of their violent, transgressive, or "extreme" characteristics echoes the controversy that had surrounded the anime boom a decade earlier. Overly sexualized fantasy titles such as *Legend of the Overfiend* (*Chōjin densetsu urotsukidōji*, dir: Takayama Hideki, 1987) 'shaped discourses about the sexualized violence inherent in many of the anime being brought to the UK by major distributors like Manga Entertainment' (Denison 2015: 67) – not in the least because these distributors, eager to promote an unknown commodity, 'sent out press packs outlining just how shocking it was.' (Clements 2009: 274) The U.K.'s official film censorship body, the British Board of Film Classification, made special mention in its annual report of 'Japanese cartoons known as anime [that] often feature scenes of women being gang-raped by lascivious, leering monsters'.[78]

Chi-Yun Shin (2009: 97) argues that the Asia Extreme label's prominence as a canon for East Asian films made it come to represent the Asian cinema as a whole. Dew uses the terms 'Asia Extreme', 'Extreme Asia'

[78] British Board of Film Classification Report 1994-1995: 20, quoted in: Clements and McCarthy 1998: 92. The uproar surrounding *Legend of the Overfiend* in particular was such that as illustrious a commentator as Ian Buruma felt compelled to weigh in on the issue, in the pages of the journal *Index on Censorship*. See Buruma 1995.

and ‘Asian Extreme cinema’ interchangeably, as a concept that no longer referred merely to the Tartan brand; by the time the scholarly debate had begun, the term Asia Extreme, or some variant thereof, no longer indicated just a corporate trademark but a ‘pan-Asian faux-genre.’ (Rawle 2009: 167) Paul Willemen argues that what genre a film is assigned to depends ‘on which sector of the industry, production or distribution/exhibition, is doing the assigning. [...] Generic categories will thus vary according to the power relations between these sectors of the industry.’ (Willemen 2005: 227) In the case of Asia Extreme, power was firmly in the hands of the distribution sector, where Tartan and its competitors fuelled the discourse of ‘the weird, the wonderful and the dangerous’. Paul Smith, Tartan’s former press officer, confirmed this in an essay for the journal *Cine-Excess*:

> ‘Asia Extreme was devised and marketed to represent a very specific genre of contemporary film from Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Thailand. Whilst Tartan acquired a body of work from these new auteurs from the Far East, some of their work fell outside that definition and was released under the general Tartan Video label.’
> (Smith 2013)[79]

[79] Smith’s article is a response to findings by Emma Pett that were ‘part of a larger research project investigating audience responses to Asian Extreme films’: Emma Pett, ‘“People Who Think Outside The Box”: British Audiences And Asian Extreme Films’, *Cine-Excess*, http://cine-excess.co.uk/british-audiences-and-asian-extreme-films.html (accessed May 12, 2013)

Smith's use of the word genre – a 'very specific genre', no less – is indicative of the company's (and the distribution sector's) attempts to generate a generic discourse, identifying textual similarities in films from quite diverse cultural and industrial backgrounds and assigning them a conveniently marketable category. This strategy sacrificed, as Rawle points out, local meaning and specificity in favor of an exotic otherness and 'extreme sexual and violent content as a norm.' (Rawle 2009: 168)

As Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano indicate (2009: 1), 'the category "Asian cinema" has been used to refer to both filmmakers' conflicting aims and aspirations and audiences' multifaceted experiences'. It has also been used to bridge that very divide. In his examination of the role of individual filmmakers within the Asia Extreme category, Needham refers back to a similar mechanism at work during the early days of Western exposure for Japanese cinema, where interest was as much due to the talents of such filmmakers as Kurosawa Akira and Mizoguchi Kenji as to the films 'being culturally other.' (Needham 2006: 9) Paul Smith's quite deliberate use of the term 'new auteur' for differentiating and positioning the films released under the Asia Extreme label (several years after the company's demise) indicates that auteurism was a tool Tartan wielded in generating the Asia Extreme discourse, and it is worth emphasizing that the British company and its imitators released all films with English subtitles. Although Tartan's marketing efforts incorporated mainstream venues such as multiplexes and chain stores, the attempts at localization that had marked Manga Entertainment's strategies a decade earlier

Figure 15: Tartan Asia Extreme UK DVD cover for *Audition*

had fallen firmly out of favor. After two decades of festival exposure, Asian genre films were no longer just popular fare released in dubbed versions. Indeed, Tartan had discovered many of the films and filmmakers it absorbed into the Asia Extreme roster through festivals and film markets, such as Miike Takashi's V-Cinema production *Gozu*, selected for the Cannes Directors' Fortnight in 2003, and Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, which as mentioned above, screened in the same festival's main competition in 2004 and was awarded the Grand Jury Prize – bestowing further prestige, visibility, and notoriety upon 'extreme' Asian cinema.

Asia Extreme extended festivals' increasingly vague distinction between high art and popular culture, in order to form a hybrid 'economically constructed category of marketable movies' (Rawle 2009: 167). Tartan employed existing categories and distinctions to suit its commercial needs, subsuming 'new auteurs' such as Miike, Nakata, Park, and Kim Ki-duk under the Asia Extreme label that 'suggest[ed] that the products of such film-makers display a predilection for excess content, usually along the lines of violence, often sexual in nature, gore, perverse sexuality, and narratives of nihilism and abjection.' (Rawle 2009: 167) At the same time, the works by these filmmakers that fell outside this definition were left out of the category and released instead, as Paul Smith indicates, under the general Tartan Video label, presumably off the radar of those who made up the Asia Extreme audience so as not to interfere with the guaranteed delivery of excessive content attached to the "auteur" in question. This was the case with Kim Ki-Duk, whose *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and*

Spring (*Bom yeoreum gaeul gyeoul geurigo bom*, 2003) was targeted at the more traditional world cinema audiences, while *The Isle* (*Seom*, 2000) and *Bad Guy* (*Nabbeun namja*, 2001) were released under the Asia Extreme brand. This removal of a single film from among an artist's body of work from the zone of popular taste into that of middle brow taste, forms a practical demonstration of Bourdieu's assessment that 'art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.' (Bourdieu 1984: xxx)

The first titles that would go on to form the Asia Extreme brand, however, were not initially labeled as such by Tartan: *Audition* (*Ōdishon*, dir: Miike Takashi, 1999), *Ring* (*Ringu*, dir: Nakata Hideo, 1998), *Battle Royale* (*Batoru rowaiaru*, dir: Fukasaku Kinji, 2001), and *The Eye* (*Gin gwai*, dirs: Danny and Oxide Pang, 2002) were part of the company's general line-up of world cinema releases. Shin quotes McAlpine in telling the Asia Extreme origin myth:

> 'The story goes that one weekend at the end of 1999, McAlpine watched two Japanese films on video, and he was 'totally blown away by them.' The two films he watched back to back that weekend were Nakata's *Ringu* and Miike's *Audition*. Soon after, he came across Thai and South Korean titles – *Bangkok Dangerous* and *Nowhere to Hide* (*Injeong sajeong bol geot eobtda*, Lee Myung-Se, 1999), which were also 'outrageously shocking' to him. In an interview, McAlpine emphasized the fact that the films came first: 'When I realised

> that these films were not one-offs and there was a constant flow of brilliant films coming out of Asia, I decided to brand it and make Asia Extreme.' And, that was how the label was born.' (Shin 2009: 85-86)

Asia Extreme's origins inverted the process that had taken place at film festivals over the past decades: where festivals had elevated popular genres to the respectable middle-brow category of art cinema (or world cinema), Asia Extreme transplanted films from the ranks of art to a self-constructed category of "dangerous" genre cinema. Within a discourse that soon 'came to "represent" the Asian cinema as a whole', the use of auteurism to legitimate the violence portrayed by some filmmakers makes genrification a process that is wholly 'based on Western notions of the self' (Needham 2006: 9): in the work of a certain "auteur," audiences are compelled to seek out the subversive and explicit treatment of sex and violence that they see as part and parcel of contemporary Japanese films, as well as their transgression of Hollywood norms. While the comprehensiveness of my own monographs on Miike Takashi[80] refutes Dew's assertion that 'an auteur reading of Miike's films has hinged on an ever more selective sampling of his output', within the context of the Asia Extreme discourse it is a valid argument that '[b]y promoting the auteur entirely through his "offputtingly extreme" violence [...], Miike's work is positioned as a

[80] Tom Mes, *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike*. Godalming: FAB Press, 2003, and *Re-Agitator: A Decade of Writing on Takashi Miike*. Godalming: FAB Press, 2013. The former analyses all of Miike's works up to the year of the book's publication.

means of testing the viewer's ability to tolerate and take pleasure from material considered as oppositional to mainstream tastes, or "paracinematic" to use Jeffrey Sconce's description of marginal cult cinema'. (Rawle 2009: 172)

Indeed, those in charge of marketing for Tartan's Asia Extreme brand seemed to have been well aware of Sconce's assertion that '[p]aracinema is [...] a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus'. (Sconce 1995: 372) They attempted to subvert notions of art or world cinema as created during festivals' third phase, by stating a contrast between its 'ballsy' roster of 'the weird, the wonderful and the dangerous' and the 'soppy, weepy' films offered by the art house establishment. Asia Extreme thus set out to create what Sconce says paracinema is not – a 'distinct group of films' (ibid.) – by focusing attention on "excess", both in its Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'outrageous or immoderate behavior' and in Kristin Thompson's application of the term in film studies as 'those aspects of the work, which are not contained by its unifying forces'. (Thompson 1986: 487), in other words: style that exceeds the scope of the diegesis. The "excess" of "excess" in films by Miike, Kim, Park, and others, was thus exploited to serve as the 'unifying force' of the Asia Extreme label, through promotional materials inviting audiences to 'take a walk on the wild side'.[81]

Maligned for creating a faux-generic category that emphasized dangerous Orientalist thrills over cultural specifics and

[81] Tartan Asia Extreme promotional material, quoted in Shin 2009: 88

artistic relevance, the once-buzzing Asia Extreme brand has now receded into obscurity. The more dispersed media distribution landscape of a decade later offers no room for the convenient funneling of the DVD age: DVDs and the chain outlets that carried them have disappeared, giving way to the fragmented jungle of online distribution. Yet, several of the talented filmmakers whose diverse creations Asia Extreme once lumped together like offal for the meat grinder have survived by continuing to do what the Tartan label and its derivatives sought to obscure. For their disparate and idiosyncratic styles of filmmaking, Miike Takashi, Kim Ki-duk, Park Chan-wook, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and others have gone on to wider individual recognition as auteurs of world cinema,[82] while lesser talents have faded from the international scene due to a lack of interest from gatekeepers. It could be argued, as Daniel Martin does (2015: 163-168), that the ongoing prominence of certain filmmakers and genres is at least in part due to the prevalence of the Asia Extreme canon in discourse on East Asian cinema during the first decade of the 21st century. But just like its marketing schemes, these notions of auteur and genre in the Asia Extreme discourse were a continuation of paradigms that date back quite a few years before the label's launch and notoriety. As evidenced by the conspicuous presences of Miike, Kurosawa, and Nakata, of yakuza movies and J-horror, these notions

[82] World cinema in a literal sense, as all these filmmakers have gone on to helm transnational projects, including films shot in English (Miike, Park, Nakata) and in French (Kurosawa).

were at least in part constructed on foundations laid in V-Cinema.