



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Mes, T.P.

Citation

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

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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

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

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

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



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

Author: Mes, T.P.

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

Issue Date: 2018-01-09

6. Slaughterhouse V

Now that the video market has brought forth auteurs of world cinema and now that a handful of intrepid scholars have provided more than adequate indexations, quantifications, case studies, and historiographies of video and its various shapes, uses, and methods of diffusion, how are cinema and media studies going to build on this foundation to integrate 'the movies formerly known as films' into their curriculum?

Several propositions have been put forward. Chuck Tryon (2009b) and Caetlin Benson-Allott, for instance, both argue for dedicated study of the ways in which video spectatorship has influenced the form of films, particularly the popular genre works that make up the bulk of video store inventory, such as the horror movie. Benson-Allott's study *Killer*

Tapes and Shattered Screens makes a persuasive case, but does not overcome the fact that this approach is feasible only for the examination of choice examples; no individual, or even collective, scholarly effort of textual analysis is capable of encompassing the breadth of an industry such as V-Cinema, which, according to Alexander Zahlten's fairly conservative estimate, has churned out well over 3,000 films since 1989.

Ramon Lobato emphasizes this daunting question of scale, when he maintains that the cinema studies toolkit is simply not equipped to deal with the sheer enormity of direct-to-video production. He looks elsewhere for a possible solution, to Franco Moretti's revisionist approach to studying literary canon formation, from which Lobato derives a re-centering of attention away from text and onto patterns of distribution. In the process, Lobato

borrowing a bit of Moretti terminology to posit DTV as 'the slaughterhouse of cinema': the vast bulk of production that is ignored or discarded from the annals of film history.

Moretti points out that close reading by nature requires a restricted canon of texts and that any attempt to move beyond the canon thus entails a departure from this method, toward forms of what he calls 'distant reading' (Moretti 2000: 57). In the matter-of-factly titled *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), Moretti borrows from the social sciences various means of quantifying literary production, in order to quite literally visualize processes of canon formation. At the heart of Moretti's models lies the argument that canon formation, in literature at least, is a generational process: how popular a book remains, how it survives, from one generation of readers to the next. While acknowledging that "generation" is in itself a

questionable concept, he maintains that it is the market, the readers, that shape literary canons: by buying and reading certain titles, readers induce publishers to keep these in print until another generation of readers appears: 'As more readers select Conan Doyle over L. T. Meade and Grant Allen, more readers are likely to select Conan Doyle again in the future, until he ends up occupying 80, 90, 99.9 percent of the market for nineteenth-century detective fiction.' (Moretti 2000b: 211)

Although Moretti draws an analogy with models of economic analysis of film industry revenue, which conclude that 20% of the films earn 80% of box office revenues,¹ his generational model of canon formation cannot be directly transposed to cinema. Firstly, as

¹ His reference for this analogy is de Vany and Walls 1996.

Jonathan Rosenbaum has pointed out, cinema has been around for a much shorter period of time than literature: two, perhaps three generations at most have until now been actively involved in canonization. (Cinema has been around for quite a bit longer than two generations, of course, and the first film archives date back to the 1930s, but intentional efforts at canon formation arguably began only in the latter half of the twentieth century.) Additionally, there is the far greater role played by gatekeepers in shaping cinematic canons: where the actors in the literary network of Moretti's models can be identified as readers, publishers, and critics, in cinema these encompass producers, distributors, festival programmers and their informants, critics, and scholars before we even come to spectators.

Nevertheless, Moretti's generational model can be highly useful in illuminating

processes of cinematic canon formation in the age of video if we redefine the notion of "generation" to mean platforms, i.e. the carriers or means of delivery of films. This gives us not only a great many, more or less subsequent, "generations" to consider (including, but not limited to, festival selection, theatrical exhibition, satellite television, rental videotape, sell-through videotape, DVD, Blu-ray, curated programs and retrospectives, terrestrial television, pay-per-view, and video-on-demand), but this also takes into account the crucial role of gatekeepers in selecting the titles to be released or shown on each successive platform.

This approach confirms Jonathan Rosenbaum's claim that canon formation in cinema is an active and ongoing process of curation. The temporal or "windowed" sequence of a film's releases across various

platforms/generations greatly informs the workings of the 20-80 rule Moretti references and not only in theatrical exhibition: films that were successful in theaters will be given more shelf space in the video store, at the expense of films that had only middling success or none at all – the latter including DTV. Due to the various gatekeepers and their interests, however, this is a more complex process than simply one of spectators voting with their feet. An example would be the problem of curation, or rather the lack thereof, in the availability of streaming video titles. In the spring of 2013, the world's largest streaming video service Netflix lost nearly 1,800 titles from its catalog due to the expiration of several of the service's licensing agreements with Hollywood studios, a loss that certain members of the press

decried as “Streamageddon”.² Netflix's predominance among streaming services, its ‘erratic and frustrating’ (Bailey 2013) catalog changes, and the absence from its library of a great number of firmly canonized works, including *Citizen Kane*, *The Godfather*, and *Seven Samurai*, have some scholars referring to the creation a ‘Netflix canon’ (Petersen 2013). This situation confirms Lobato's argument that the idea of video as a level playing field for all contestants is a myth: distribution shapes demand and reception (Lobato 2012: 36), and gatekeeping and curation shape distribution.

A case more pertinent to the topic at hand, in this regard, is the transition from VHS to DVD. The small plastic disc, with the same

² See Bishop 2013; Warren 2013; Bailey 2013; Bailey 2015

look and size as a compact disc, but with far greater storage capacity, was, in stark contrast to the videocassette, developed with the full support of the Hollywood studios, which saw it as a means to increase their control over copyrighted works. (McDonald 2007: 57; Benson-Allott 2013: 102) That this development centered around DVD's use as a playback medium for prerecorded content – which, as Anne Friedberg observes (2002: 35), preceded its eventual recording capacities – is a testament to how vital a source of income video, specifically the video rental market, had become for the film industry, specifically Hollywood. DVD's lower production costs allowed for relatively low retail pricing, thus increasing the video sell-through market and, with the promise of better picture and sound quality plus the addition of bonus features such as making-of documentaries and audio

commentary tracks, prompting consumers to replace their videotape libraries with the new platform.³ The introduction and adoption of DVD also created great instability in the American video rental market, however. For video store owners, the promise of a relative but not insignificant increase in shelf space, thanks to the thinner, smaller boxes of the DVDs compared to those for VHS tapes, was offset by the need to acquire an entirely new inventory, and, for as long as the older platform was still economically viable, to stock both a DVD and a VHS copy of every title. As Daniel Herbert (2014: 42) points out, the size of this investment was well out of reach for a great

³ The presence of bonus features on DVD releases also emphasized the format's suitability for sell-through over rental, as a 24-hour rental period hardly give viewers an opportunity to experience such features.

number of independently owned stores, effectively forcing them out of business. Large nation-wide and multinational chains such as Blockbuster and Hollywood Video did not escape unharmed either, since the lightweight format of the DVD allowed for the creation of rent-by-mail services such as Netflix (in its pre-streaming incarnation), which made a trip to the video store unnecessary and did away with such irksome inevitabilities of the video-store experience as late fees and the commandment to 'Be kind, rewind'. With the spread of videotape, spectators left the theater in order to frequent their neighborhood video stores. Now they no longer even needed to leave the house.

Ownership of DVD players in American homes grew from less than one million by the end of 1998 to more than 24 million households by 2001. (Herbert 2014: 40)

Japan, by comparison, was slower to adopt the platform. By the end of 1998, less than 500,000 units had been shipped to retailers (McDonald 2007: 97), a sizeable part of which would feasibly not have found its way into consumers' homes yet. One reason Paul McDonald gives for the slow adoption of the format by Japanese consumers is a relative dearth of available software: a dispute between filmmakers and producers over royalties on releases for the new platform prevented domestic productions from receiving a DVD release. One other reason, noted by Benson-Allott, would be that a relatively large number of Japanese VCR owners still regularly used their machines for time-shifting purposes. This would help explain why Japan was the world's first market for the introduction of DVD recorders, in 1999. McDonald notes that the availability of DVD recorders spurred greater

demand for DVD hardware in Japan, yet as late as 2005, penetration of DVD players into Japanese households remained one of the lowest in industrialized nations: 44%, compared to 73% in the US and 72% in the UK (McDonald 2007: 99).⁴

The high retail price of discs (4,700 yen or US\$ 36.35, the highest average price in the world) worked, in contrast to developments in the United States, in favor of the rental market. As early as 1997, hardware manufacturers Toshiba and Matsushita partnered with Culture Convenience Club, owner of the nation-wide video rental chain Tsutaya, and producer/distributor (and video maker) Gaga Communications to launch

⁴ McDonald nuances this statistic somewhat by pointing out that owners of Sony PlayStation 2 game consoles also used these devices for playing DVDs.

Culture Publishers, a DVD distribution outfit aimed specifically at the rental market.⁵ The V-Cinema industry, however, remained largely aloof toward the new disc format, maintaining that its audience still consisted primarily of VCR owners. With this curatorial decision, it contributed to its own decline. Zahlten (2007: 358) argues that, along with the assumptions about class and generation underpinning it, this form of reasoning helped to solidify V-Cinema's image as inferior and outdated. Indeed, the gradual rise of DVD is mirrored by a decline of V-Cinema: in 2004, gross income for DVD rentals in Japan overtook that of VHS.

⁵ McDonald notes an initial general disinterest from the Japanese film industry toward DVD. While he offers no explanation for this, one reason might be the relative absence of video piracy in Japan – a problem that figured among the main reasons for the Hollywood studios to support the platform as a playback-only medium.

In 2005, when most video makers had finally embraced the platform (and some had found new release strategies to fit it, such as documentaries and anime), average sales of new V-Cinema titles were down to as low as 3,000 units nationwide, DVD and VHS confounded. (Zahlten 2007: 384) Through the V-Cinema industry's attitude toward DVD, the converse argument that the DVD audience did not watch V-Cinema became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As we have seen, DVD had a strong effect on the wider, international diffusion of V-Cinema and a number of its proponents. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano has analyzed the proliferation of J-horror, from a low-budget genre for the domestic video market to a transnational franchise, as a phenomenon enabled specifically by the genre's formal aptness to the characteristics of the digital disc

format. This, she notes, helped make it 'a significant departure from the [Japanese] cinema's long-standing failure in foreign markets.' (Wada-Marciano 2012: 41). She goes so far as to call J-horror a 'global cinema', emphasizing that it managed to attain this position thanks to the spread of the DVD format. This, she argues, is what sets J-horror apart from past instances of global diffusion by 'some auteur films circulated by international film festivals' (ibid.). DVD shifted the balance of power in the gatekeeping process: distributors moved ahead of festival programmers, and both were ahead of critics and well ahead of scholars. As noted in chapter 5, the formal and narrative characteristics of J-horror were a reaction to previous forms of commercial horror cinema, itself not a territory in which

festival programmers have ever displayed great interest.⁶

Wada-Marciano contends that an important factor in J-horror's success via these channels was the prolific output of the filmmakers, in terms of both speed and number. We have already noted how such productivity finds its roots in V-Cinema production practices, and with the rapid uptake of the DVD format, this lent itself to the distribution sector's increasing demand for genre product. Genre productivity created its own potential for serialization, facilitating, for example, the rapid construction of a canon within the Asia Extreme discourse. This canon had an ambivalent yet symbiotic relationship with the auteurist inclinations of film festival

⁶ With the exception of the fantasy short circuit, which found in this neglected niche its *raison d'être*.

programming and film criticism: while works marketable by their genre alone provided the meat and potatoes, a top layer emphasized the prestige of auteur credentials. Thus, the extensive back catalogue of the astoundingly prolific Miike Takashi provided a treasure trove for Tartan and other foreign distributors, who invariably branded their DVD releases of even the most obscure of the director's straight-to-video productions with the strapline: 'From the director of *Audition*'.⁷

This serialization continued in the increasing transnational migration of J-horror in particular, through sequels, remakes, and sequels-to-remakes, leading to *Ring* director Nakata Hideo eventually helming *The Ring 2* (2005), the sequel to the Hollywood remake of

⁷ Dew 2005 (66) has noted this particular use of auteurism.

his own film – not to be confused with *Ring 2* (*Ringu 2*, 1999), also directed by Nakata – and Shimizu Takashi directing first the Japanese theatrical remake of his straight-to-video *Ju-on*, then its sequel, and subsequently the Hollywood remake, *The Grudge* (2004), as well as its sequel, *The Grudge 2* (2006).⁸ As Wada-Marciano emphasizes, J-horror as a global cinema countered traditional assumptions of hegemony and capital in cinema as moving from the center to the periphery, i.e. from Hollywood to the rest of the world. It had moved in the opposite direction. Wada points to the precedent of Japanese animation’s global spread in the 1980s and early 1990s,

⁸ The Hollywood remake and its sequel were then of course exported “back” to Japan, where they were released under the transnational hybrid title THE JUON. It is somehow fitting that *The Grudge 3* (2009), directed by Toby Wilkins, was a straight-to-DVD release in the U.S.A.

during the era of the videotape. She argues that video distribution allowed anime to preserve a degree of cultural authenticity, that, unlike its televised forbears of the 1960s and ’70s, required little to no localization and could retain the spoken Japanese language, Japanese names, and culturally specific settings and behaviors, such as eating and bathing.⁹

Even as J-horror had come to encompass Hollywood productions that played on multiplex screens worldwide, the movement from periphery to center continued, and arguably in a more strategic fashion, with efforts at making films in Japan that catered

⁹ Both anime and J-horror are common examples in discourse on the “soft power” of Japan’s export of popular culture products. See McGray 2002; Tsutsui 2010; Katsumata 2012; Wada-Marciano 2012: 41-46, and others.

specifically to this global market. This was the case with the Ichise Takashige-produced *J-Horror Theater* (2004-05) series of features, which were aimed at the foreign DVD market, i.e. the domain so effectively mined by Asia Extreme and its imitators. In a contrast with the Toei V-America project with which Ichise had previously been involved, these J-horror productions shunned any form of localization. This series included works directed by Tsuruta Norio, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and Shimizu Takashi, as well as a more recent addition to the canon of J-horror directors, Shiraishi Kōji.¹⁰

¹⁰ Another example of this form of production for the international DVD market is Nikkatsu's Sushi Typhoon label, which specialized in self-consciously transgressive "cult" films seemingly modeled on Miike Takashi's more exuberant V-Cinema works, such as *Fudoh* and *Full Metal Yakuza*.

In the light of all this, we can safely proclaim J-horror to be V-Cinema's most wide-reaching and influential proponent. It is rather odd, therefore, that Tanioka Masaki's many publications on V-Cinema (five books between 1999 and 2008) ignore the genre altogether, presumably because its crossover popularity does not sit well with the male-focused discourse he attempts to construct throughout his writings. Zahlten devotes several solid pages to the topic, but, due to his chosen emphasis on rules and conventions, he calls horror an 'exception' in V-Cinema. While there is certainly ground for such an argument, from the diverging audiences to the genre's intimate connection with a pre-V-Cinema mode of production, such a categorization mostly emphasizes that V-Cinema was prone to generating unexpectedly influential exceptions to its own rules.

Curating by Numbers

If the current paradigms of film scholarship look ill equipped to deal with the numerical excess of V-Cinema and other forms of straight-to-video filmmaking, by the nature of their game, film festivals and other forms of curated film programming are unlikely to provide a way forward.

The film festival in particular appears to be experiencing various challenges to its status and influence as a gatekeeping institution. Marijke de Valck's model of phases in films festivals' development, based on shifting priorities and centers of influence, breaks down as follows: the first phase of film festivals was the age of the diplomat, the second phase was the age of the programmer, and the third phase the age of the festival director. Were we to extend the paradigm with an eye on recent developments, we might

argue that festivals are currently entering a fourth phase, the age of the sales agent. Critics (Peranson 2009) as well as scholars (de Valck, Kredel, and Loist 2016: 169) have noted the increasing influence of film sales companies on festival programming.¹¹ One effect of this appears to be a steadier presence of already familiar names, those world cinema auteurs whose new works habitually appear on the rosters of (primarily European) sales agents such as Wild Bunch, Fortissimo, and Celluloid Dreams. Both Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Miike Takashi have benefited from such a privileged relation with this particular group of gatekeepers, which could be interpreted as a

¹¹ As well as the emergence of other intermediary parties, such as online film submission services and business-to-business platforms. See de Valck et al 2016: 41; Follows 2016.

sign that they are now firmly canonized (and thus profitably traded) auteurs of world cinema.

Yet, these two filmmakers' increasingly firm inclusion in the canon can only confront us with the same problem: within the parameters of the canon, how do we cope with a filmmaker such as Miike, who has, so far, made close to a hundred feature films, many of which can, for practical or technical reason, effectively not be shown? The rights to a good number of his early V-Cinema works reside in an obscure, if not to say shady, legal limbo, due to bankruptcies, liquidations, or more opaque disappearances of producers and video makers at various points during the fluctuating fortunes of the V-Cinema industry. Along with them have disappeared negatives and master tapes, leaving second-hand, 25-year-old VHS copies as the only extant remnants of their film catalogs. Under such circumstances, which

venue is equipped to show the complete, 100-film Miike retrospective? Who is going to curate it, and how? Aside from the practical hurdles, the sheer enormity makes the task unfeasible – and here we are talking about the body of work of just one director...¹²

At the moment, the only method by which to approach V-Cinema curatorially appears, inevitably, to be drastic reduction. But reduction in another word is ignoring what does not conveniently fit into existing models. This is of course as convenient as it is par for the course: all canons are by nature reductive, while omission enhances the impression of a considered effort at curation. In 2014, Toei

¹² The earliest film included in the three major Miike Takashi retrospectives organized to date (Turin, Italy, in 2006; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2011; Sitges, Spain, in 2013) was, almost inevitably, 1995's *Shinjuku Triad Society*.

Video celebrated the 25th anniversary of its V-Cinema label with two initiatives at canon formation: a screening program of twenty-five Toei V-Cinema productions and the publication of a book featuring a seemingly comprehensive listing of all Toei V-Cinema releases. The book *Tōei V shinema taizen* (The Complete Toei V-Cinema) does indeed list all titles released under the Toei V-Cinema label between 1989 and 2006 – each accompanied by a listing of main cast and crew, genre indication, front cover video box art, and a brief content description – but it entirely ignores the existence of Toei’s various spin-off V-labels, making no mention of the films that were released as V-America, V-World, V-Erotica, or Young V-Cinema, or even the limited theatrical releases that came out under the general Toei Video aegis in order to uphold their silver-screen sheen. While a very

practical reference work, certainly for the present dissertation, *The Complete Toei V-Cinema* is anything but complete. Meanwhile, genre film magazine *Eiga Hihō* (‘Film’s Secret Treasures’) seized the occasion to publish its own shot at creating a V-Cinema canon: the book *90-nendai kuruizaki V shinema jigoku* (1990s Crazy V-Cinema Hell) wore the magazine’s paracinematic colors on its sleeve, listing dozens of thoroughly obscure (even by V-Cinema standards) titles, while omitting more prominent and influential works.¹³ All this is in keeping with the publication’s name and mission: as an attempt at canon building, the approach here is staunchly anti-canonical,

¹³ The horror section, for example, includes neither *Scary True Stories* nor *Juon*, but does contain two pre-V-Cinema works from the ‘age of confusion’, including a 45-minute splatter movie distributed by Nikkatsu’s video division in 1986, *Biotherapy* (*Baioseraipī*, dir: Kashima Akihiro).

even using newly created genre categories such as “Outlaw,” “Desire,” and “Chaos” as organizing principles. Or rather, in a confirmation of both Karine Barzilai-Nahon’s model as discussed in chapter 2 and Jeffrey Sconce’s observations about paracinema’s cultural politics, its attempt at evading a canon is simply a gatekeeping mechanism, which paradoxically drives a gatekeeper which identifies itself as anti-canonical – in this case a magazine that knows the ‘secret treasures’ of cinema – to embrace canon building. One gets the impression that, as soon as any of the films listed were to actually become canonical, the *Eiga Hihō* editors will abandon it for something even more obscure. Some time before these two publications, in 2002, the first attempt at a V-Cinema canon in book form was Tanioka Masaki’s *Kingū obu V shinema gōrudo katarogu 100sen* (King of V-Cinema: 100-title

gold catalogue). His selection is characteristically subjective and idiosyncratic, though no more than, say, Andrew Sarris’s list of fourteen great directors in *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions* (1968). Sarris, however, at least presented his selection as rooted in a theoretical principle, regardless of how criticized it was, while Tanioka, as Zahlten has observed, rarely if ever works from any sort of theoretical framework.

What unites the three books’ attempts at setting up canons of V-Cinema, as compared to the canon formation processes discussed in chapter 2, is that they operated in a relative vacuum. When Tanioka published his *King of V-Cinema*, the topic had long since vanished from film discourse in Japan. The book was published when the rental video market’s transition from VHS to DVD was

accelerating and V-Cinema was becoming increasingly invisible in that domain as well. The timing of Tanioka's book was doubtlessly meant to coincide with these transformations, giving the book the status of an archeological excavation, capturing the films included in its pages like exhibits in a museum display, artifacts from a vanished culture. One gets a similar feeling from *1990s Crazy V-Cinema Hell*, a title whose temporal reference underlines the book's archaeological function. The nostalgic discourse surrounding V-Cinema's 25th anniversary was, however, also practiced in the pages of the mainstream film press, including multi-page spreads in *Kinema Junpō* and *Shinario*, but V-Cinema's presence in the still quite numerous video rental stores around Japan has, if anything, only continued to decrease since the switch to DVD. The brief

upsurge of nostalgia-induced interest of 2014 has resulted in little or no rejuvenation.

The likely reason for this absence of follow-up can be deduced from Toei's 25-film retrospective program.¹⁴ Why certain titles were chosen over others (*Crime Hunter 3* instead of *Crime Hunter*, for instance) is not an issue that requires much quibbling: the decision was likely not entirely an aesthetic one, given, firstly, the corporate origins of the event and, secondly, the practical obstacles to screening many V-Cinema productions in a film theater. The screenings were performed

¹⁴ The line-up for the retrospective can be found at: <http://www.laputa-jp.com/laputa/program/toei-v-cinema/> [accessed: January 12, 2017]. To mark the occasion, the company also theatrically released the feature film *25 (Nijū-go)*, 2014, dir: Kashima Tsutomu), starring Aikawa Shō and co-written by the writer/director of *Crime Hunter*, Ōkawa Toshimichi.

from DVCAM masters, an outdated, tape-based, consumer-grade digital video format. Given its history as a major studio and its continuing prominence in the Japanese film industry, Toei's archival and preservation efforts are among the best one is likely to find in the V-Cinema field. The company has re-released a good many (though not all) titles on DVD and/or through streaming outlets,¹⁵ but further curatorial efforts or further "generations", including foreign distribution, of V-Cinema will depend on Toei and other companies' willingness to invest in creating the

¹⁵ VOD provider Showtime's Toei V-Cinema channel has been replaced by a V-Cinema section that also includes movies from other companies: <http://www.showtime.jp> [accessed: January 7, 2017]

high-definition digital prints now required for theatrical screening, Blu-ray, and VOD.¹⁶

Despite the existence of archival film festivals, festivals and retrospectives will likely never be ideal formats for an encompassing approach to V-Cinema.¹⁷ However, some profound changes have been underway that at the least undermine the oligopolistic status of the major film festivals in the canonization stakes. Abé Mark Nornes has noted the rise of "anti-canonical" film festivals: events devoted to the cinematic output of a single nation or region – a festival form that has proliferated over the past two decades, in various countries and across continents. Japanese cinema appears to be a particular favorite theme, with

¹⁶ In February of 2017, Bandai released Zeiram and Zeiram 2 on Blu-ray.

¹⁷ On archival film festivals, see: Marlow-Mann 2013.

events such as Nippon Connection (Germany), Camera Japan (The Netherlands), the Toronto Japanese Film Festival (Canada), and the Japanese Film Festival Jakarta (Indonesia) being just a few examples. Nornes points out that while, for instance, Berlin continues to show a handful of films from Japan each year, those works no longer look quite so extraordinary when ‘a few months later and only three hundred miles away, Frankfurt’s Nippon Connection shows those films plus 150 others [from Japan].’ (Nornes 2015: 260) Although we are dealing here with a fringe development with a somewhat precarious future – these events are often founded by students or film fans and their existence largely depends on ever-decreasing sources of public funding – this newly emerging short circuit paradoxically finds room to rethink existing

processes of gatekeeping and canon formation in a more intense focus on national cinemas.

However, as Franco Moretti stresses, doing more of what we are already doing is not a solution to the problem of an enormity of scale, which is a matter we must reckon with if we are to deal with straight-to-video filmmaking. Mentioning or screening ever more titles until we can close down the slaughterhouse is unfeasible: firstly, there are simply too many to handle within existing forms of gatekeeping, from the film festival format to the film studies toolkit; secondly, a ‘cultural form based on the pleasures of mediocrity’, in Ramon Lobato’s words, will not survive such scrutiny. This is how it ended up in the slaughterhouse in the first place: it failed to take even the first hurdle in the gatekeeping process. Yes, there are definitely V-Cinema productions that do not deserve to languish in

obscurity, and one could curate, as Toei did, a thoroughly enjoyable, perhaps even artistically inspiring retrospective of 25 (or more, or less – see the point about reduction above) titles and tour this selection past various festivals, cinematheques, and revival houses. Maybe a few of them will even be hailed as discoveries or, dare we say it, “minor masterpieces.” And while such an initiative may prove a catalyst for awareness and some degree of discourse – comparable to the effects of the ‘Pink Pictures from Japan’ program at the 1996 Rotterdam Film Festival – this still would not tackle the question of scale and therefore the intrinsic identity of V-Cinema. An approach based on aesthetics will not solve this, since, as Margaret Cohen argues in her treatise on the forgotten novels of nineteenth-century France, such ignored works need to be taken on their own terms: ‘Without understanding that

forgotten works are shaped by a coherent, if now lost, aesthetic, one simply dismisses them as uninteresting or inferior in terms of the aesthetic(s) which have won out.’ (Cohen 1999: 21) A different mindset and a different approach are needed.

Obsolete Technology as Meaningful Material

In early 2015, the Yale University Library made headlines when it announced the acquisition of over 2,500 prerecorded VHS tapes from a private collector.¹⁸ While the acquisition of films in what was deemed an obsolete format was newsworthy in itself, what truly drew attention was the fact that the vast majority of the collection consisted of horror and exploitation

¹⁸ Kitroeff 2015; Stannard 2015; Gonzalez 2015; Gary 2015

movies. The purchase was not a film studies initiative: David Gary, the librarian in charge of the project, specialized in American history, meaning the initiative was one of heritage preservation. Gary notes that one reason for the move was to preserve rare titles, pointing out that an estimated 40-45 percent of content distributed on VHS in the United States was never re-released on later platforms (Gary 2015).

While a percentage is hard to calculate, this issue of vanishing heritage is also a pressing one for V-Cinema, given many producers and video makers' obstinate adversity to DVD and the aforementioned disappearance of many actors on the production, manufacturing, and distribution sides of its network. The need for a concerted effort at video preservation has already been acknowledged in academia: NYU launched its

Video at Risk program and the accompanying guidelines for university librarians and archivists in 2012,¹⁹ four years before the mainstream press broke out in a chorus of 'RIP VHS' when Japanese electronics manufacturer Funai Electric announced that the world's last newly manufactured VCR would roll off its assembly line in July 2016.²⁰ The Yale initiative, however, is about more than preserving physical media and their (textual)

¹⁹ These guidelines can be downloaded in pdf format at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1119&context=cheer> [accessed January 6, 2017]. A predecessor to the NYU program guidelines is The Commission on Preservation and Access (Washington D.C.)'s 'Magnetic Tape Storage and Handling: A Guide for Libraries and Archives' (1995), available at: <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub54/> [accessed: January 10, 2017]

²⁰ Sun and Yan 2016; Hodak 2016; Paul 2016

contents. Gary emphasizes the importance of paratext, or what he calls the ‘materiality of VHS’ (Kitroeff 2015): the physical assets of the tape, in particular its box and cover art, those ‘tangible qualities that have defined the medium’s uniqueness and its legacy’. (Gary 2015)

Gary’s different disciplinary background may well have influenced his emphasis on the materiality of the medium in addition to a desire to save the films contained therein, but his approach continues on what some voices in film and media studies have previously advocated. His inclusion of trailers among a VHS release’s valuable assets (which ‘offer evidence of how distribution companies were figuring out the best way to communicate with audiences’ (Gary 2015)) is related to Lucas Hilderbrand’s arguments that the analog video aesthetic is uniquely medium-specific.

Additionally, Hilderbrand, Benson-Allott, and Charles Acland stress analog video’s transitional position as a ‘middle-aged’ technology (Hilderbrand 2008: xii), a medium stage they claim is often overlooked in comparative analysis of “old” and “new” media. Acland in particular warns of the dangers of following, consciously or not, marketing discourses of newness in the study of media and technology:

‘By drawing attention to that dust-covered box and to those under-utilized black plastic rectangles, whose contents may be marked for DVD transfer or junk, I am advocating for scholarship that addresses fading media machines. If we took industry trades publications seriously, videotape died years ago, and we

would ignore it in favor of whatever has been deemed the economic golden goose of the moment. [...] The prioritization of the “new” on our research agendas draws us more in synch with the priorities of the consumer electronics business. We become “incubators” for products and markets. A counter-veiling force in scholarship must meet this, one that situates the gleaming promises of ethereal media with a critical orientation toward the materiality of existing cultural life – dominant, emergent, and residual’.
(Acland 2009)

Inflected by issues from cultural materialism and media archaeology, these concerns over a (lack of) scholarly resistance to discourses of

newness in turn echo Jonathan Rosenbaum’s call for active participation in canon formation by scholars and critics as a counterweight to commercial imperatives. When we talk about video as an object of academic study, Margaret Cohen’s urging to take forgotten works on their own terms can be extended to include the medium’s own specific aesthetics and extra-textual materiality. Only in this way can video studies serve a critical, legitimated function in film and media studies and contribute to keeping those disciplines relevant.

When it comes to studying direct-to-video, however, there is another specificity that comes into play: the fact that we are dealing with an intrinsically different situation than with theatrical films that were ‘translated’, to use Charles Tashiro’s term, onto tape or disc for home viewing. With DTV, the tape or the disc

is the original cinematic experience. Paradoxical as it may sound for a mechanically reproduced medium *par excellence*, Walter Benjamin's contentions about art and its mechanical reproduction, which informed so much of film studies' resistance to videotape, do not hold true for V-Cinema, since the rental videotape was the method by which it was meant to be seen.²¹ We must even extend the experience to include the box in which the tape is packaged and the paratext that covers it, the store from which it was rented, and the situation in which it was viewed. While there is nothing we can do to bring back truly ephemeral, specific instances of renting and

²¹ V-Cinema also forms a different case from Gene Youngblood's notion of videographic cinema, which informs Hilderbrand's approach to the medium, since the vast majority of V-Cinema productions were shot on film. See: Youngblood 1970.

viewing, each of such instances – including a future one in which, say, a 25-year-old tape is culled from a university library and watched on a viewing station by an inquisitive grad student – could be seen as constituting a new, original cinematic experience. There is, therefore, every reason to salvage and preserve cassettes, box cover art, and other extra-textual, peripheral materials connected to the filmic experience of V-Cinema.

Alexander Zahlten briefly evokes the multitude of meanings attached to video packaging when he discusses the 1991 Toei 'gun action' film *The Tusk of Evil* as a paradigmatic example of a V-Cinema release:

'The rental tape cover features a man in a leather coat and bandana headband sporting a machine gun. The backside shows him variably firing

the gun, having sex, and fighting one-on-one with someone else in an exploding warehouse. The text on the cover speaks of the actor on the cover, Matano Seiji, as the “new hardboiled hero” after the late Matsuda Yûsaku, and advertises the film to be full of “hard violence” and set in “streets full of non-nationality.” [...] one look at the rental tape of the film would suffice, for most film-knowledgeable Japanese, to assign the film to the genre of V-Cinema. Indeed the cover, and the images and text that it carries, are loaded with clues that assign a certain identity to the film [...] and the cover situates the film in its relation to the (filmic) past, to the film industry of its time, and to the socio-politic and economic situation of the country. Via

the interrelated discourses referenced by the cover, it constructs a potentially decipherable, highly specific meaning.’ (Zahlten 2007: 26-27)

Joshua Greenberg argues that our experience or awareness of the videocassette’s materiality was lost during its transition from a recording technology to ‘a medium for movies’ (Greenberg 2008: 5). Initially, the videocassette was seen as an accessory to the VCR, a kind of interchangeable part of the technology, but in the video store the tapes became ‘boxes containing nothing more tangible than the experience of watching a movie itself. The boxes [...] served as placeholders – signifiers referring not to a specific cassette, but to the idealized text encoded therein’ (ibid. 86-87). If we are to study V-Cinema effectively, we must therefore

return to the realization that the videocassette is ‘both container of film text and artifact in its own right’ (Flanagan 2010). Such a realization is what drives the recent trend of VHS collecting, particularly in North America. Often compared in mainstream press reports to the collecting of vinyl records,²² the discourse around both phenomena emphasizes a conscious opposition to the immateriality and elusiveness of digital content, and the potential for loss when ownership is replaced by access.²³ Video collectors, in most cases VHS collectors, tend to favor and search out the extra-textual, material aspects of the videotape: oversized boxes instead of

²² See for instance: Rife 2014; Bailey 2015; NEMMC.org 2016

²³ Very similar concerns underpin the aesthetic subculture of steampunk. See Bowser and Croxall 2016.

cardboard slipcases; ex-rental copies from the 1970s and '80s era of “mom-and-pop video stores” instead of standardized sell-through tapes from the corporation-dominated home video market of the 1990s; horror and exploitation movies with garish cover art over more sedate generic representations. We could dismiss VHS collecting as a fetishistic proclivity of the nostalgic, but these collectors’ nostalgia testifies to the enduring impact of a movie culture that was, for roughly three decades – almost the same length of time as the silent film era – the way most spectators experienced and consumed cinema. We need to acknowledge this fact and treat extra-textual factors accordingly. There is no reason for film and media scholars to shy away from displaying the same fervor as the collector in studying the material aspects of video culture, especially when the academic paradigms are

already in place, from the Yale library initiative and the previously mentioned writings of Greenberg and Hilderbrand to Jonathan Gray's study on paratext in cinema.

Combine this with the knowledge that V-Cinema's heritage, this very same materiality, is vanishing – with the very real possibility of being irreplaceable – and it becomes clear that the time is ripe, in fact overdue, to take the idea of media archaeology quite literally and initiate a concerted effort at preservation and scholarship. V-Cinema's image as 'vulgar, opportunistic, and mercantile' has greatly influenced its current condition of precariousness, both in terms of its market presence and of its material existence: from the outside, this image has made V-Cinema seem valueless, not worth the trouble to preserve; on the inside, the attitude was in many cases much the same. While larger

players such as Toei and Nikkatsu, and such video makers still in operation as Museum and KSS,²⁴ possess adequate archives containing at least negatives and/or master tapes, it is anyone's guess where and in what condition the raw materials are stored of the hundreds if not thousands of movies produced by the many video makers now gone and nearly forgotten – assuming those materials still exist. And these are not always as deserving of their fates as their low discursive status might have one believe. Video maker Hero, to name one example, has titles directed by both Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Miike Takashi in its back

²⁴ Albeit active under different names: Museum is now called All-In Entertainment and KSS currently operates as Softgarage.

catalogue²⁵ – or rather, it had them until the company went out of business sometime during the latter half of the 1990s [Figure 21]. Few people who worked on the films have the slightest clue as to their whereabouts and the alleged participation in their financing by elements of organized crime – elements to whom ownership of rights and materials may have subsequently passed – places an additional layer of taboo over the topic: few involved care to discuss the matter in any sort of depth. It will require resolute investigation to track down these films and their material manifestations before we can begin the archival and research efforts necessary to valorize V-Cinema – and, by extension, to

valorize Japanese cinema as something that extends and exists beyond the brand names of the familiar handful of canonized auteurs and the discourses and practices that have sprung up around them.

²⁵ Including *Men of Rage* (*Jan otokotachi no gekijō*, 1994), directed by Kurosawa, and *The Third Yakuza* (*Daisan no gokudō*, 1995), directed by Miike.

V-Cinema and the Canon: V Stands for Vital

The cinema of Japan and its international reception provide us with a very informative and revealing historical case study of the workings of canon formation in cinema. But at a time when video is the discursive norm of motion picture production²⁶ and direct-to-video distribution is the empirical norm of contemporary cinema, we must reconsider what we mean by “Japanese cinema” and how we interpret the processes that underlie our cinematic canons.

Focusing our attention on video as a release (and re-release) platform for films – or rather, the movies formerly known as films – widens and challenges our understanding of national cinemas and film canons, their gestation and formation, and their effects on

film culture and discourse. Incorporating video opens up film scholarship to a generational approach to film canons, derived from the models provided by Franco Moretti, which allows us to fully integrate the fact that video has formed the foundation of the business models employed by film industries for the past three decades. This generational model of successive modes of distribution is applicable to previously canonized works as well as to the contemporary creation of canons from the ground up, since these “generations” – the carriers, platforms, or modes of distribution – are in constant interaction with the various gatekeepers that shape film distribution and film discourse, including distributors, programmers, scholars, and critics, in an on-going process of giving and receiving. The Asia Extreme discourse forms an excellent example, as it hinged on festival screenings

²⁶ See Benson-Allott 2013: 13

and theatrical releases of new films, on marketing hype as well as on critical and scholarly reception, all while keeping the DVD format firmly at its core – faltering as that platform’s market position diminished, yet making a lasting contribution to the canonization of certain films and filmmakers.

However, even with the adoption of this generational model, we must remember to treat each generation on its own merits. In a similar way to the debunked center-to-periphery model that holds up Hollywood cinema as norm, it is habitually assumed that theatrical screening forms the benchmark, while the role of home video is secondary, an ancillary platform, a compromised ‘translation’ of the theatrical experience with no inherent artistic merit or scholarly interest. This is where V-Cinema serves as a crucial wake-up call. By interrupting the temporal sequence of film

distribution and even turning it around 180 degrees, from what was assumed to be the periphery (video release / Japan) to what was assumed to be the center (theatrical exhibition / Hollywood), V-Cinema challenges – more so than other instances of direct-to-video releasing that have stayed fixed to home formats – such accepted notions about the stages of a film’s lifespan, about the status and merits of home video formats, and about what exactly constitutes the cinematic experience.

There is no canon without a slaughterhouse. Conversely, wading through the slaughterhouse can provide us with great insight into how canons are formed. This is the point on which this dissertation has differed most sharply from the preceding research on V-Cinema done by Alexander Zahlten, whose refutation of exceptionalism risks to fossilize the chosen topic into a mere footnote in the

history of a national cinema, a quaint, outdated production model irrelevant to issues and concerns in film culture today. Approaching V-Cinema from the framework of canon formation teaches us that V-Cinema continues to make its influence felt in the world and that canons – certainly canons of cinema – are not set in stone: a movie that was first released directly onto VHS in Japan eventually becomes a global Hollywood film franchise; a director who cranked out several dozen DTV quickies rises to the status of world cinema auteur. In spite of all its inherent restrictions, V-Cinema, this low-budget, industrial form of genre movie making, increasingly obscure in film discourse and intimately connected to a technology and film viewing platform long considered obsolete, intersects with issues that are at the forefront of contemporary film culture. It has not only played an active part in shaping canons, it may

yet serve a vital role in reshaping the ways we study film, urging us to reconsider our inflections as film scholars and as gatekeepers – and to reexamine the very tools of our craft.