

PROGRAMMING A PUBLIC MEDIASCAPE: DISTRIBUTION AND THE JAPANESE  
MOTION PICTURES EXPERIENCE

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# Programming a Public Mediascape: Distribution and the Japanese Motion Pictures Experience

## Abstract

This essay sheds light on how a film distribution apparatus, which aimed to cater to the entire population as one, in effect ushered in a process of collectivization of cultural life experience, as well as media aesthetics, in postwar Japan.

While public discourses on nationhood were discouraged in postwar Japan, information and other textual contents about nationhood flowed freely. The national space as a unified location started to re-reform in the mid-1950s. This was after the country regained its sovereignty, and a new medium—television—emerged in the public sphere. However, more than these two factors, I argue that it was the film studio distribution apparatus labeled the “program picture,” which enabled an imaginary reunification of viewership throughout the country. Although not entirely unique to the postwar era, this distribution system was predicated on economic models of vertical integration, which in the midst of several medial transformations, established a dominant cinematic aesthetics that has been equally disseminated throughout the country.

## 1 Introduction

Virtually every scholarly work that centers on media distribution states the marginality of distribution studies. Even Alisa Perren, who argues that this marginality is simply a matter of different definitions of “distribution,” would agree that much more scholarly attention has been given to reception, production, and exhibition. In recent years much progress has been made, and scholars now have a small yet growing body of scholarly literature on the subject.

Many studies on distribution define it loosely as the missing link between production and exhibition, and focus mainly on new media, the Internet, and television. Most studies that deal with film distribution pay attention to transitional cinemas, focusing particularly on how filmic content travels from the non-West into Western markets. For example, Toby Miller, Freya Schiwy, and Marta Hernández Salván flesh out previously understudied distribution channels for Latin American films to the United States, and convey the importance of the study by underlining the capital produced in this seemingly simple intermediary process, or neutral delivery service.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Deborah Shaw discusses Latin American production as part of a transnational distribution apparatus that caters to international audiences rather than domestic ones.<sup>2</sup> Ramon Lobato and Mark David Ryan go even further, identifying the decisive role distribution plays in international films’ genre classification and even their production.<sup>3</sup>

These studies make clear that distribution is not merely a vehicle for transporting media products from producers to exhibitors, and they provide much insight into how media culture is shaped by distributors who do more than simply ship films to the West from various locations around the globe or vice versa. Beyond distribution to film theaters, scholars also underline sales of DVDs and, in more recent cases, online streaming of films that cater to specific populations. The latter are particularly pertinent in television research.

In the following I discuss a case study of a domestic distribution apparatus that operated in specific time in postwar Japan, between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. Unlike previous and current trends in scholarship on distribution, I single out how this operation linked local and national modes of viewership by involving numerous distributors, the major domestic studios, and thousands of film theaters throughout the Japanese archipelago—including Okinawa, which was under U.S control at the time, and, to a lesser degree, Japanese communities in California, Hawaii, and Brazil. Moreover, unlike other studies, this paper demonstrates a contra-globalized vision, or at least one that is indifferent to international media flows. At the same time, however, new discourses on distribution, including those pertaining to the digital age and to television, provide a vocabulary with which to articulate the cinematic case on which this paper concentrates. I thus use the essay's case study to reflect on contemporary medial state of affairs, as well as to introduce and invigorate the burgeoning academic study on distribution as a field worthy of particular scholarly attention.

## **2\_What Is Media Distribution?**

Although the studies mentioned above do give a sense of the term “media distribution,” they do not provide a concrete definition. Distribution is the mechanism by which films or other media products reach audiences, viewers, and/or consumers; however, there seems to be more than one such mediator or vehicle. For this reason, it is necessary to define the term more specifically, particularly because thinking of distribution simply as a disinterested intermediary or a fair go-between might be misleading. In his monograph *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, Ramon Lobato defines distribution broadly as “the movement of media through time and space.”<sup>4</sup> He acknowledges that distribution determines not just what will reach audiences, but also what will not. He then discusses

different, less dominant, channels by which distributors sell films or make them available for viewers, channels that try to compete with or circumscribe what John W. Cones calls “major film distribution scenarios.” Cones names five such business practices: “In-house production/distribution,” whereby the producer is also the distributor; “Production-financing/distribution,” whereby the producer funds the distribution of the film, but the distributor is independent; “Negative pickup,” a situation in which the distributor makes a contractual commitment before the film is produced under certain criteria that must be met; “Acquisition deal,” when a distributor purchased a film; and lastly, “Rent-a-distributor,” which is similar to an acquisition deal, but here the distributor buys only a limited amount of distribution time.<sup>5</sup> Although these scenarios do not form a single definition, they nonetheless provide much needed explanatory detail about the practice of disseminating media products across time and space.

Cones does not claim that his scenarios of distribution deals are exhaustive, only that they are the most common forms of film distribution for one particular time (the last decade of the twentieth century) and place (North America). This description lacks a broader map and historical perspective, as well as the implications that intermediary forces have on the production, exhibition, and reception of moving images. Although the scope of Cones’ study is acutely limited, it does shed light on the reality of how media products reach consumers, and it is a rare glimpse into this otherwise largely understudied practice. Moreover, despite its narrow outlook, Cones’ framework depicts a contractual mechanism that also existed during the second decade in postwar Japan.

### **3 From Distributing Film to Programming Pictures in Postwar Japanese Cinema**

In 1952, the recently appointed head of Tōei studios, Ōkawa Hiroshi, initiated an ambitious plan that he labeled the “Tōei goraku han” (Tōei’s Entertainment Edition, or block). On the surface, the initiative essentially doubled the studio’s film output and formed firm connections with film theaters that would exclusively screen two new films by the studio as a double-bill every week. To ensure the success of his plan, Ōkawa turned to an independent distribution company, Zen Puro Haikyū, which distributed films by all other major studios, and independent ones as well. Zen Puro Haikyū continued to distribute films regardless of their producing studios until Tōei was ready to release its flagship product, its “Program Picture” (*puroguramu pikuchā*).<sup>6</sup>

With this label the studio packaged its productions as one unit of continuous cinematic flow.

Around the mid-1950s, all major studios in Japan, including Tōei, reached an overarching deal with distributors and film theaters: the studios would supply two new films every week, and in return theaters would screen their products exclusively. Distributors therefore established a route between a single studio and cinemas throughout the country under a long-term contract. Theaters started to show two films back-to-back as a double-bill (*nihontate*) by the same studio. The studios also reached an agreement among themselves that they would ban any exhibitor that broke the contract with one studio; the contract thus had long-term binding power.

These long-standing agreements effectively remapped the domestic film market and exposed viewers to an inflated kind of branded films. Distributors usually released film prints first in cinemas located in big cities, normally for weeklong screenings, before taking the same prints to peripheral, smaller towns, and eventually to the most rural locations, where studio-linked or -owned theaters operated.<sup>7</sup> Circulation of films was therefore uneven, and the quality of the prints deteriorated significantly by the time they reached the smallest communities. However, the flow of moving images was consistent, continuous, and well-established. While the major film studios also had direct links with film theaters, independent distributors helped the studios form an all-encompassing grid of studio-based film experience that allowed little visibility for foreign and independent productions. Moreover, as Thomas Lamarre maintains with regard to the early days of animation broadcasting on television in Japan, it can be precisely “the discontinuity that produces continuity, or the segmentation that generates flow.”<sup>8</sup> Lamarre bases his argument on Yuriko Furuhashi’s analysis of expanded cinema from control rooms and environmental art,<sup>9</sup> to form what he calls a “disjunctive synthesis” that amends disruptions in the transmission and reception of televisual animated content. Similar binding syntheses of cinematic content has begun, I argue, with the program picture distribution apparatuses, while television, as I will show later, filled gaps in the continuous flow with new content between screenings.

Although distributors prioritized populated areas over more rural ones, which led to a certain time-lap in releases, I nonetheless argue that one form of simultaneity persisted. Despite time discrepancies among different cinema locales, I argue that the very act of constantly (albeit not evenly) disseminating motion pictures as a flow of the

“new” created a sense of shared space and time both locally and nationally, predicated on a unified experience of commercial cinematic programming.

#### **4 Programming Communities**

Scholars have showed little interest in the effect of distribution in the non-West. One notable exception is Jeffrey Himpele’s anthropological study on film distribution in Bolivia in the last decade of the previous century, “Film Distribution as Media: Mapping Difference in the Bolivian Cinemascope.” In his study, Himpele draws lines between distribution practices, exhibition houses, and viewers in several locations in Bolivia. Although his research methods and goals differ from this paper’s, his study is nevertheless informative in the way it applies Arjun Appadurai’s use of the suffix “-scape” to delineate the effect ushered in by distribution. Himpele refers, on the one hand, to the spectacle cinema offers, following Gunning’s influential “Cinema of Attraction”<sup>10</sup> thesis, while, on the other hand, referring to Ien Ang’s work on television<sup>11</sup> rather than to film narratives to describe the social space distribution creates.<sup>12</sup>

Appadurai famously used the suffix “-scape” to discuss features of global flows. Extending Benedict Anderson’s discussion of “imagined communities,” Appadurai identifies new global landscapes, “imagined worlds” that “are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe.”<sup>13</sup> If Anderson argues for the formation of national imagery based on the shared consumption of newspapers, to which he refers tentatively as “one-day bestsellers,” or an “extreme form of the book,”<sup>14</sup> Appadurai goes further, discussing a shared sense of belonging to a community beyond national borders. Among his examples are Turkish migrants in Germany who watch Turkish films, Koreans in Philadelphia watching the Seoul Olympic Games on television,<sup>15</sup> and Muslim families listening to recordings of Islamic speeches on cassette tapes.<sup>16</sup>

Both Anderson and Appadurai give much more importance to the act of textual consumption over what is being consumed, or the means by which consumption is made possible. The emphasis of this paper is the latter, but I also want to stress the significance of “news items.” The somewhat McLuhanistic notion that prioritizes the medium of consumption over the content being consumed<sup>17</sup> is largely true also in the case of postwar Japanese cinema. Yet, as I will show later, cinematic form, fiction film, and the news shared the space within certain discourses created by the media. Although cinema

was not a new medium in 1950s Japan, presentations of new films in tandem with the news helped manifest in postwar Japan a new sense of a democratic and capitalistic “public sphere,” similar to the way Jürgen Habermas argues took shape with the mass traffic of newspapers in Europe and North America.<sup>18</sup>

As Roger Hagedorn points out, newspapers, albeit mainly a vehicle for spreading factual information (in addition to commentary on such facts), had a crucial part in popularizing fiction as a commodity that circulates among large populations. Hagedorn argues that specifically serialization of stories on newspapers meant to promote the (new) medium in which they appear (newspapers).<sup>19</sup> In other words, in order to promote a new medium, or to sustain its emerging popularity, editors used fictional forms of continuous attraction. Then, as today, distributors were the force responsible for sustaining the wide-spread availability of a medium, or its continuous flow. Stuart Hall discussed such nexuses between production and circulation in his groundbreaking essay “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” in which he also lays out the notion of “flow” as an inherent feature of one medium: television.<sup>20</sup> More than the content itself, he elucidates, is the fact that a given medium enables new forms of experiences within a specific socio-cultural situation.

Rather than “flow,” Bruno Latour uses the word “network” to describe the way socio-cultural imagery is formed. With this concept he expresses three main features:

- a) a point-to-point connection is being established that is physically traceable and thus can be recorded empirically;
- b) such a connection leaves empty most of what is not connected, as any fisherman knows when throwing a net into the sea;
- c) this connection is not made for free; it requires effort, as any fisherman knows when repairing a net on the deck.

To these three features Latour adds a tentative fourth: “the trace left behind by some moving agent.”<sup>21</sup> This figurative model allows a visualization of the social fabric that every community—particularly imaginary ones—can be articulated along lines of communication among active social agents. A network (or more precisely, actor-network) can thus also be a useful term with which to theorize distribution, as well as the connection between agencies of film production and exhibition.

While not invoking Latour, Peter Bosma uses a network-like model to articulate distributors’ fundamental work of connecting agents in the broader spectrum of the film

industry apparatus. These networks, he points out, “consist of the film crew, sales agents, film festivals, film theatres and the cinema audience.” Yet, this film distribution network is itself part of an even larger network of economic interests around the notions of “value chain” and “supply chain.”<sup>22</sup> This economic model also situates the distributor as a curator of films in various venues of film exhibition, a fact to which I will draw more attention later.

In addition to the economic aspects of film networks of distributors and curators, there are also cultural agents active in the film circuits, including the filmgoers themselves. Although people who watch films do not usually leave marks of their viewership in a traceable way, films, at times, do. I do not mean to suggest “textual” traces exist within films’ narratives, but rather that the types of films that exist reveal the network that enabled their circulation. For example, Frank Kelleter, in his fourth perspective on film seriality, theorizes the actor-network as a:

[...] (re)productive assemblage of acting persons and transpersonal institutions as well as action-conducting forms, narrative conventions and inventions, technologies with specific affordances, and non-personal objects and aesthetic theories about such objects.<sup>23</sup>

The active networking of films in this theorization allows for many moving parts, changing circumstances, and an evolving media ecology. This factor therefore should be considered for the case study in this paper. During the period in Japan known as the postwar golden age of Japanese cinema, the film series was probably the most dominant form with which distributors saturated the market. However, Kelleter also acknowledges difficulties applying the model to accurately map such a complex network drawn by so many actors.

Moreover, Kelleter’s model accounts mainly for a relationship between viewership and the production of a certain kind of filmmaking, including cinematic forms and narratives. While distribution, as Ramon Lobato and others have shown, can also and indeed often does influence film production, this influence is not distribution’s main function. Rather, distribution, at least in the context of this essay, is—to paraphrase Latour—the trace left behind by agents of motion pictures. I intend to single out the trace more than the agents, and even more than the films themselves. To be sure, Kelleter’s model is relevant here as well, given that theoretical or discursive dimensions of distribution are limited, and that distribution by nature links many active agents.

The problem with either model is their applicability. After all, no real traces mark the travel of films from sites of production to those of exhibition or reception. The only visible manifestations of distribution can be seen *ex post facto*, by means of retrieving traces of passages that had been completed. Moreover, the fact that a given film traveled from point ‘a’ at a certain time and reached point ‘b’ at another time may not be as significant for the viewing experience as other factors that already receive much scrutiny by media scholars. Indeed, much of the scholarship on distribution focuses on how distributors contribute to one or more of the already well-studied elements in media studies.

## **5 From Media to Film Programming**

It is true that distribution in many cases determines or even enables the sites of production and exhibition, as in some of the examples above. However, distribution itself can also be a meaningful site. One of the most tangible forms of distribution as a site is programming. For instance, Juan Piñón makes a complex argument about the consumption of Spanish-language televisual content in the United States. He analyzes crossboarding media in general and scrutinizes in particular television programming that he articulates as a site of distribution.<sup>24</sup>

Television and new media forms are obvious platforms through which programming defines distribution. The rights to broadcast content is arguably one of the most fundamental characteristics of television as a medium, while streaming and direct TV are new forms of distribution as tailored programming. However, such mechanisms are not unique to newer media outlets. In fact, as Michael Quinn argues, distribution as programming was at the core of early cinema, before the transition to feature films. Quinn illustrates how scheduling of releases, rather than film narratives, was a driving force behind the rise in popularity of the medium during the early 1910s, when its definition was in flux.<sup>25</sup> During the time of “programmed-based cinema,” distributors did not simply cater to audiences interested in a one-of-a-kind cinematic experience. Rather, there were what Quinn calls “transient audiences,” that is, casual viewers who distributors imagined were people “simply passing through the theater district, or perhaps looking for amusement at a neighborhood theater, not someone who went out in search of a specific film.”<sup>26</sup>

After the transition to feature films, programming did not end, and several notable forms of it exist today beyond the realm of new media or television. For instance, Liz Czach studies programming for film festivals, and argues that such events can shape canon building and possibly branding films as national cinema. Czach highlights Canadian cinema, which does not produce much revenue at local box offices, and asserts that for Canadian films to be recognized as a coherent national cinematic phenomenon, appearances at domestic and international film festivals are the most powerful way to widen their acceptance as representations of the country.<sup>27</sup>

Although I consider distribution as programming in a different sense from the one Czach discusses, her perspective is relevant in contextualizing early postwar Japanese cinema. Indeed, the initial global recognition of Japanese national cinema occurred after successful screenings of selective films at international festivals, including *Rashomon* (dir. Kurosawa, 1950) at the Venice Film Festival in 1951 and *Gate of Hell* (dir. Kinugasa, 1953) at the Cannes Film Festival in 1954.<sup>28</sup>

As in the case of commercial film distribution, Tamara L. Falicov discusses how film festival programming can fund certain art-house film productions. Falicov frames her approach around SooJeong Ahn's articulation of film festivals as "cultural intermediaries."<sup>29</sup> Falicov fleshes out the implications of funding productions that originate from international film festivals in order to include them in a future festival's program, as well as the global culture of such a circular model of distribution-production-programming-exhibition.<sup>30</sup> It therefore seems that some forms of economic vertical integration exist also in the art world, as was previously the case (albeit for a short period) in North America<sup>31</sup> and between 1955 and 1965 in Japan, as I argue here.

## **6\_Programming a Japanese National Cinema**

As noted already, in the mid-1950s, the Japanese studio Tōei unveiled its branded "program picture," which was a wholesale deal of films distributed directly to theaters that signed an agreement to screen exclusively the studio's long-running film series. This design was not entirely unprecedented, and the idea of "programs" had several mutations in Japanese film history in the context of commercial popular cinema culture. However, scholars have displayed almost no interest in this historical phenomenon. Among the few exceptions is novelist, Kanō Ichirō, who dedicated two non-fiction books to this subject.<sup>32</sup> Beyond popular writing, to my knowledge, Kondō Kazuto has

contributed the only thorough academic study highlighting the importance of programming in the history of Japanese film.

Many film festivals produce printed programs to follow screenings with information on the films. Commercial film programs in Japan also have a long tradition of publishing program pamphlets. These are sometime known as *chirashi*, but as Kondō's study shows, they were perceived, from the inception of commercial programming in Japan, as its essence. Kanō traces the practice of producing such written material in Japan to musical programs, particularly Western classical music. With film programs, he traces the practice to the late nineteen teens, around 1918, when film theaters such as the Teikokukan in the Asakusa district in Tokyo started giving supplemental material to its customers.<sup>33</sup> Kondō uses Ozu Yasujirō's 1933 silent film *Woman of Tokyo* (*Tokyo no onna*) as an example of the significance of these free handouts in prewar Japan. In one scene in the film, the protagonist, Ryōichi (played by Egawa Ureo), attends a film screening with his love interest Harue (played by Tanaka Kinuyo). Harue is uncomfortable and explains to Ryōichi that she lost the program (*puroguramu*). He then gives her his own copy, so she can share the experience at the theater with her older brother.

Following the work of philosopher Bernard Stiegler, Kondō develops a compelling argument for the role programs had in enhancing and/or expanding the film-watching experience. The screening Ozu's protagonists attend is of *If I Had a Million* (dir. Lubitsch, Taurog, Roberts, McLeod, Cruze, Seiter, and Humberstone, 1932), which is an omnibus film, or what David Scott Diffrient calls a "transauthorial" or episodic film.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, while there are some textual or thematic links between Ozu's film and the omnibus film, Ozu's protagonists may have just finished watching or were about to watch a second one, *The Night of June 13* (dir. Roberts, 1932), which was also on the program. Harue looks at the printed program later in the film, just before she hears that Ryōichi committed suicide.



Fig. 1: The film program that appears in *Woman of Tokyo*. On the right side is *If I Had a Million*, and *The Night of June 13* is on the left.<sup>35</sup>

The links to these two Hollywood productions therefore complicate the contextualization of Ozu's film with the narrative of *If I Had a Million*, which refers to some of the socio-economic problems on display in *Woman of Tokyo*. In fact, there are some thematic links between Ozu's film and *The Night of June 13*, particularly given that in both films the male protagonist takes his own life.

Kondō does not make a point about film textuality, however. Rather, he argues that cinema increased its visibility using the program, highlighting the wording used in programs and showing how film fans throughout the country shared printed programs. Around the release of *Woman of Tokyo*, two terms were used: a direct transliteration of the English word "program" into *puroguramu*, and the Japanese *bangumi* (a term used mainly for TV programs now). During the earliest days of programs at the Teikokukan, the film theater called its elaborated pamphlet *shinbun*, or newspaper, and later even "news." The association between film programming and public knowledge, a connection also evident in Ozu's film, is telling.

At the end of the film, news reporters question Harue and Ryōichi's sister about the circumstances that led to his suicide, but they eventually conclude that the story is not newsworthy ("tokudane ni wa naranai," literally, that it will not become a "scoop" or an "exclusive story").<sup>36</sup>

Although films do not directly disseminate news,<sup>37</sup> in the media ecology of the day, films exhibited a notion of the "new," informing public conversation about fashion,

style, and other aspects of contemporaneous ways of life in Japan and abroad. In the last sequence of *Woman of Tokyo*, the news reporters stumble upon a note posted on a pole that reports about a case published by a rival newspaper.



Fig. 2: A posted newspaper advertisement at the end of *Woman of Tokyo*.<sup>38</sup>

Although film textuality is limited in its ability to capture the film experience as a whole, it is telling that Ozu's film interweaves film programming and distribution of information, scandals, or news. The main distributor of *Woman of Tokyo* was its producing studio, Shochiku, which first released it at the Asakusa Teikokukan, the theater that probably initiated the film program in Japan. Moreover, the theater screened the film in a double-bill along with *Mushuku fukaamigasa* (dir. Inaba, 1933), a jidaigeki or period drama, a fact that further complicates the textual effect the film had on viewers at the time. However, Ozu's film, in narrative as well as programming, reveals the intricate network of national cinema within the context of domestic media.

## 7\_Film in the Postwar Media Ecology

Film programming in prewar Japan was similar in many ways to its postwar reincarnation. One such similarity was the effect of film programming on public discourse. Another similarity was the circuits and time-lapse programming produced, because the timing and places of releases continued into the postwar era.<sup>39</sup> Although the discrepancy between local and national distribution was only mildly ameliorated by the printed program, it is, I argue, the glue that enabled a wider comprehensive discourse in the postwar era.

Moreover, I contend that, although commercial programming in Japan was to a large extent a matter of exhibition in the prewar era, such programming was an inherent part of a distribution mechanism in the second decade after World War II. To be sure, the film theater produced the actual program, just as in the prewar years. However, there were several crucial transmutations to the programs in the postwar environment that rendered individual film theaters into extensions of an expanding web.

The most notable break from the prewar years was the development of a new media ecology. This statement may seem tautological, because each period manufactures unique features based on technological, economical, and social evolutions. While the latter two developments are obviously important given the capitalistic democracy that was new in Japan after the war, it is specifically technological communication advancement that affected cinema the most. In particular, the beginning of television broadcasting in 1953 marks a fundamental rupture in the way individuals and communities experienced motion pictures.

The following program for *Woman of Tokyo* from the film theater Eibusu Teikokukan (another Tokyo branch of the same chain as the one in the Asakusa ward location) sheds light on programming as an exhibition mechanism in the prewar period.



Fig. 3: Printed program from Eibusu Teikokukan for *Woman of Tokyo*.<sup>40</sup>

The theater programmed Ozu's film with different films than the theater of the same chain in Asakusa. The second feature in this program was *Shunjū yakuza sugoroku* (The

Yakuza's Spring and Fall Sugoroku, dir. Watanabe, 1933), in addition to a collection of various animated short films (*manga eiga*). This difference in programming shows that discrepancies existed not just among programs in various areas of the country, but even within the same city, from theater to theater. This case also demonstrates how programming was an exhibition practice, rather than one initiated by a film studio, or by a distribution network.

Conversely, in the postwar era, programming was primarily a matter of studio branding, and, more than local advertisement, it was a building block in a long-running schedule of theatrical releases. Studios posted advertisements in newspapers and magazines, which often dedicated a page to studios' weekly or bi-weekly double features. The studios released their newest films as weekly units first at affiliated theaters in big cities, and then distributed them to the rest of the country, establishing a network of their branded stations that offered a continuous flow of similar packaged films.

For example, the following printed program from a Tōei-affiliated theater in Ogikubo, a residential district of Tokyo, screened the studio's two newest films between April 30 and May 6, 1958: *Renai jiyū gata* (Free Style Love, dir. Saeki, 1958) and *Ōedo shichinin shū* (Seven Men of Great Edo, dir. Matsuda, 1958).



Fig. 4: Tōei Ogikubo printed pamphlet, April 30–May 6, 1958.<sup>41</sup>

The *chirashi* also informs visitors of the releases for the following week from the studio and the theater, *Uogashi no Ishimatsu* (Ishimatsu of Uogashi, dir. Koishi, 1958) and

*Futeki na hankō* (Fearless Defiance, dir. Makino, 1958). These four films bear little resemblance to one another; indeed, they fall into different genres (crime, comedy, period drama, and romantic drama). Yet, the studio distributed all of these films simultaneously, even in areas that did not accommodate major entertainment venues or attractions in the outskirts of big cities. This simultaneity and coherency among studios' branded programs, its weekly double-feature releases, and local published programs also corresponded with information on forthcoming releases that newspapers published daily and *shūkanshi* (weekly magazines) published weekly. Thus, networks of distribution established a correspondence among millions of viewers or potential viewers, much like that of television programming in the following decades, in Japan and elsewhere in the pre-digital world.

Simultaneity in terms of the timing of film releases, however, was limited to the big cities. Distributors did not have enough prints to send to all theaters at the same time. As a result, smaller theaters or those located outside the most populated regions of the country had to wait one to three weeks to screen the studios' newest films. Tōei's theaters were no exception to this wait, because many of its directly controlled or affiliated theaters were located in rural or peripheral areas. Rather than strict unanimity in terms of release timing, therefore, distributors emphasized the branded package and the continuous streaming experience that theaters throughout the country offered. For instance, the following program is from a cinema house affiliated with Tōhō (a studio that mostly had controlled or affiliated theaters in the biggest metropolitan areas), in Kokura, a town on the southern island of Kyushu.



Fig. 5: Tōhō Kokura's *chirashi*.<sup>42</sup>

The main film of the week was *Ōban* (an adaption of a literary work by Shishi Bunroku of the same title, dir. Chiba, 1957), a film the studio released a week earlier in Tokyo and other highly populated parts of the country. However, to compensate for the time lapse, distributors changed the package and paired the film with the newly released *Bibō no miyako* (The Capital's Handsome Face, dir. Matsubayashi, 1957), an independent production that Tōhō distributed. Distributors then repackaged the film that was initially paired with *Ōban*, a chapter from a long-running series of films about the outlaw Jirochō, with the film for the following week, *Mehiro Sanpei monogatari: Uchi no ōyobō* (The Story of Mejiro Sanpei: My Wife, dir. Suzuki, 1957). The bottom of the program also lists titles and information about future attractions in order to underline the continuous flow of the studio's branded nationally distributed program. Moreover, while some discrepancy existed in the timing of the releases of Tōhō films in Kokura, the cinema house also stressed adherence to actuality or the "new" by programming Asahi's newsreels into its schedule (a common practice, but rarely a feature on a printed program), along with trailers of new studio productions. The inclusion of this information on the program again emphasized the continuous stream and the tuning-in with other theaters around the country.

Despite the use of terms such as “flow” and “streaming,” the practice of distributing film in the early postwar years in Japan was not technologically entirely different from that in prewar or inner-war times. Such distribution norm was also worlds apart from the practice of scheduling programs for television or online streaming services in the digital age. Yet the arrival of television changed the dynamics of distribution as means of releasing films and as an intermediary between production and exhibition. Instead of a vehicle in the service of exhibition, distributors had to mediate between alternative media outlets and provide a coherent and continuous program consistent with a single studio brand.

In the prewar years, Japanese distributors obtained film prints from multiple sources and pitched them in various, singular packages based on availability and in most cases without involving the studio in the process. In the postwar era, alternatively, distributors had to maintain the studio-branded program. To be sure, the studios were occasionally involved in distribution before the end of the war, like in the case of Asakusa’s Teikokukan, but even other theaters of the same chain relied on alternative distributors.

Hiroyuki Kitaura, who has contributed the most in-depth study on film culture amid the rise of television in postwar Japan, describes the transition as a shift from “free-booking” to “block-booking.”<sup>43</sup> Limiting the market, or even “blocking” it, in terms of establishing distribution chains between studios and theaters, also resulted in the marginalization of foreign films. Partially due to the governmental restriction on removing locally earned revenues to other countries, but mainly due to a fear of being left without film prints, distributors effectively turned theaters into a channel or an extension of a major Japanese studio. Foreign productions, particularly American films, which were once front and center in the Japanese film world, were now less visible, and rural areas nearly inaccessible. This change did not mean that Japanese people were no longer exposed to globally distributed productions, but access was severely limited, mainly to film theaters in large urban areas and to television.

Studies often concentrate on the emergence of new media forms or alternatives to preexisting production practices. The advent of the Internet and the establishment of online streaming services have made scholars reexamine distribution as a significant factor in the way audiences consume media products. However, old media practices do not simply cease to be. Rather, there is usually a phase of overlapping usage, or an ecosystem that nurtures more than a single mode of media consumption. This period is

not merely a phasing-out of older media as a new competitor gradually takes it over, but a time when surrogates and advocates for the older form rethink their positions in order to maintain them amid growing threats.

In postwar Japan, studios understood that the rise of television would jeopardize their position as providers of the most popular form of mass entertainment. They did not simply wait idly by to see their market share shrink, but worked proactively to transform the medium to withstand rising competition. By initiating their “programs,” however, studios did not simply mimicked television programing. Rather, they refashioned cinema via a process of what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call “remediation.” Following Derrida, Bolter and Grusin explain that remediation is similar to mimesis only insofar as it is “the reproduction of the feeling of imitation or resemblance in the perceiving subject.”<sup>44</sup> That is, Japanese studios imitated not television as such, but only the aesthetic exposure to a constant and continuous televisual flow. Distribution was most instrumental in ushering in this experience, and it was a crucial element in cinema’s popularity in the decade after the beginning of public and commercial television in Japan, and roughly until the mid-1960s. This unprecedented popularity and the dominance of the film industry led scholars to name this period in Japanese history “the postwar golden age of cinema.”<sup>45</sup>

## **8\_Disseminating Films as News and Vice Versa**

A studio’s branded program picture was thus the most effective distribution mechanism that enabled the flourishing of films in postwar Japan. This approach, I argue, is a remediation of television programing, even if the studio did not envision it solely as means to compete with the new medium. Yet television, as Shunya Yoshimi points out, was not the domestic medium it is now known to be. Rather, during the 1950s, most Japanese consumed televisual content on the streets, where *gaito terebi* or “open air television” sets were placed. Television in this specific Japanese sense, Yoshimi claims, “was important not only as the stimulus for the quantitative growth of TV viewing, but also reflected a linkage between TV and the popular imagination characteristic of a certain postwar period.”<sup>46</sup>

This manifestation of television also sheds new light on another prewar practices that continued into the postwar years: the presentation of film programs in tandem with the news. As seen in the case of *Woman of Tokyo*, intersecting information on current

events and newly released fiction films as news has its roots in prewar times. In the postwar years, such practices should have been impossible to mimic. Newspapers and other printed material were much more easily accessible and widely distributed than ever before, and more people consumed news on the radio and on television. It is therefore difficult to conceive how film programs containing the same content for an entire week, could be distributed as news. In particular, the loose notion of simultaneity that only partially worked to distribute films, was the essence of television at the time, on which the news was broadcast live.

However, theaters throughout Japan continued to label their printed programs “news,” whereas the terminology itself, either in English or as a loan word in kana, *nyūsu*, along with film as well, either *firumu*, or *eiga*, was in flux. At times, different media outlets used the terms interchangeably.



Fig. 6: Ropponmatsu Tōei News.<sup>47</sup>



Fig. 7: Yamato Tōei *nyūsu*.<sup>48</sup>

Figures 6 and 7 are Tōei pamphlets distributed to audiences at two theaters at different times. Neither uses the term “program” for the printed brochure, but rather “news” in English (Fig. 6) and on the right side in kana (Fig. 7).

While theaters presented films as “news,” television channels often programmed actual news as *eiga*, or films. Furuta Hisateru, exploring the convoluted history of early news broadcasting on Japanese television, points out that when NHK (Japan’s national public broadcasting organization) first started broadcasting in 1953, films (*eiga*) in its programming meant news (*nyūsu*). Although this terminology did not continue for more than a year, for a time, the official classification for newsreels in film theaters was *eiga nyūsu* (news films), while on television it was *nyūsu eiga* (news films). The latter was reserved mainly for news broadcasting produced by NHK, but the television network wanted to distinguish its own news productions and gradually omitted the word “film.” However, the confusion in the terminology for news on television did not end with the removal of the title “film” from news programs. NHK’s television channel only intensified the confusion with its programming: the network called the fifteen-minute timeslots at noon and at seven in the evening “film.” At these times, NHK occasionally showed short films, some labeled *mūbī taimuzu* (movie times), but more often NHK showed regional news and the channel’s own *terebi nyūsu* (TV news).<sup>49</sup>

Furuta does not explore the implications of these labeling complications on the perception of cinema. Elsewhere, however, he considers the emergence or reemergence of animation and the variety of terms film studios and television networks used for it.<sup>50</sup>

I do not argue that just because of the language used for both television and cinema at the time, media consumers were confused, or that they conflated news with films. Nor do I intend to suggest that watching the news was in any way similar to watching fiction films. Rather, I argue that films and the news contributed, albeit in different ways, to a converging discourse. That is, within the flux of media turbulences, programmers for both television and cinema placed fiction films and factual information pertaining to the everyday on the same platform within the public sphere. If *Woman of Tokyo* exemplified an intersection between printed news and motion pictures, the introduction of televisual news added a new contextual dimension. Whether intentionally or not, the program picture intertwined films as news with news as such for “transient” filmgoers after they left or on the way to the theater on an “open air television.” Thus, the program rendered cinema too, to a certain degree at least, an “open air” medium.

Moreover, the flawed dissemination of information as programmed pictures, and of film as public knowledge, manufactured both a mediascape and a mindscape. Both media sources, in other words, channeled a new sense of the mainstream, by simultaneously streaming a constant flow of mental projections. This is not to say that the entire population consumed all, or even most, of the content that was streamed. Rather, the infusion of televisual programs into the burgeoning market of commercial film programming diffused what was streaming more widely than before, compensating for a media state in flux, and inadvertently forming cohesive Japanese viewership, or an all-embracing community of potential viewers.

## **9 Conclusion**

Jean-Paul Sartre discusses a process of collectivization by describing individuals with seemingly no common denominator who are gathered at a bus stop. The group is not entirely inactive, nor is their participation in the newly formed unit altogether passive. These individuals are all waiting for the bus. Their destinations might be different, as are their reasons for wanting to reach their destinations, but they are united in the act of waiting.<sup>51</sup>

Sartre does not consider the group’s performance of waiting as action per se; rather, he uses the term *praxis* to describe their collective activity. In his foreword to Sartre’s work, Fredric Jameson explains that the term *praxis* refers to both the ontological dimensions of the perceived or uninvolved form of the act and to its historical ones.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than an intentional form of grouping, based on free will or the objective to become members of a social collective, the group of waiting individuals are participating in a collective existence of a serial agglomeration. Jameson explicates that the logic of such seriality is that in which individuals co-exist side-by-side in indifference and anonymity.<sup>53</sup>

Applying the same logic to media consumption in postwar Japan elucidates the fabrication of a collective based on its susceptibility to the experience of motion pictures. The new distribution networks of the mid- 1950s and early 1960s assigned individuals a role in passive unity of agents that mediated among one another simply by their subjugation to the network. The network allowed only limited space for alternative media content, and its intertwining of fiction and the news ensured that even partially informed individuals participated as agents. Seen in this light, distribution ushered in a system that effectively rendered free individuals into distributors, intermediaries between their existence as individuals and the collective.

The embrace of the network loosened when the state of media convergence started to break down. Film studios gained more revenues from other sources, like producing content for television, including animated commercials. Animation soon became a formidable media mode, as did television as a more mature medium. In addition, what Ramon Lobato calls “informal distribution” became more prominent. This informal distribution began in the form of after-hours screenings or night shows, which provided an alternative source for media content that was not appropriate for large segments of society.<sup>54</sup> This content gradually found its way out of marginality and into a growingly diverse mainstream. As this happened, Hollywood regained its place as a global media force, and with it cinema did the same, on the strength of individual films released as single bills outside of any program scheme (as in the prewar years, in locally programmed exhibitions).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Toby Miller, Freya Schiwy, and Marta Hernández Salván, “Distribution, The Forgotten Element in Transnational Cinema,” in *Transnational Cinemas 2.2* (2012), 197–215.
- <sup>2</sup> Daborah Shaw, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Transnational Cinema,” in *Contemporary Hispanic Cinema: Interrogating the Transnational in Spanish and Latin American Film*, ed. Stephanie Dennison (Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2013), 52–53.

- <sup>3</sup> Ramon Lobato and Mark David Ryan, "Rethinking Genre Studies Through Distribution Analysis: Issues In International Horror Movie Circuits," in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9.2 (2011), 188–203.
- <sup>4</sup> Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.
- <sup>5</sup> John W. Cones, *The Feature Film Distribution Deal: A Critical Analysis of the Single Most Important Film Industry Agreement* (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 29–30.
- <sup>6</sup> Tsugata Nobuyuki, *Dizuni o mezashita otoko: Ōkawa Hiroshi, wasurerareta sōgyōsha* (Tokyo: Nihon Hyōronsha, 2016), 70–90.
- <sup>7</sup> The phenomenon of releasing films in more populated areas is of course not unique to Japan, nor are the consequences of timing discrepancies. For an example of a similar case in North America, see: Darlene C. Chisholm, Margaret S. McMillan, and George Norman, "Product Differentiation and Film-Programming Choice: Do First-Run Movie Theaters Show the Same Films?," in *Journal of Cultural Economics* 34.2 (2010), 131–145.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Ecology: A Genealogy of Television, Animation, and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Yuriko Furuhashi, "Multimedia Environments and Security Operations: Expo '70 as a Laboratory of Governance," in *Grey Room* 54 (2014), 56–79.
- <sup>10</sup> Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Wide Angle* 8.3–4 (1986), 63–77.
- <sup>11</sup> Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London/New York: Routledge, 1991).
- <sup>12</sup> Jeffrey D. Himpele, "Film Distribution as Media: Mapping Difference in the Bolivian Cinemascape," in *Visual Anthropology Review* 12.1 (1996), 47–66.
- <sup>13</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.
- <sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 34–35.
- <sup>15</sup> Appadurai, 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Appadurai, 7.
- <sup>17</sup> See Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967).
- <sup>18</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
- <sup>19</sup> Roger Hagedorn, "Technology and Economic Exploitation: The Serial as a Form of Narrative Presentation," in *Wide Angle* 10.4 (1988), 5.
- <sup>20</sup> Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson, 2007), 128–138.
- <sup>21</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Bosma, *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), 35.
- <sup>23</sup> Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality," in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 26.

- 24 Juan Piñón, “The Unexplored Challenges of Television Distribution: The Case of Azteca America,” in *Television & New Media* 12.1 (2011), 67.
- 25 Michael Quinn, “Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to the Feature Film,” in *Cinema Journal* 40.2 (2001), 36–39.
- 26 Ibid., 42.
- 27 Liz Czach, “Film Festivals, Programing, and the Building of a National Cinema,” in *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 4.1 (2004), 76–88.
- 28 For an argument about the role of Japanese films (and *Rashomon* in particular) in establishing a “threshold” for Japanese cinema on the map of world cinema, see: Scott Nygren, *Time Frames: Japanese Cinema and the Unfolding of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 99–114.
- 29 SooJeong Ahn, *The Pusan International Film Festival, South Korean Cinema and Globalization* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 111–112.
- 30 Tamara L. Falicov, “The ‘Festival Film’ Film Festival Funds As Cultural Intermediaries,” in *Film Festivals History, Theory, Method, Practice*, eds. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell and Skadi Loist (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 209–229.
- 31 On this see, for instance: F. Andrew Hanssen, “Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era,” in *The Journal of Law and Economics* 53.3 (2010), 519–543.
- 32 These books are: *Eiga puroguramu guraffiti: Eiga hyaku nen, sono kagayaku seishun* (1995, Film Program Graffiti: Hundred Years of Cinema, Its Shining Youth), and *Eiga wa hikari to kage no taimutraberu: Eiga puroguramu no jidai* (2005, Cinema’s Light and Shadow Time Travel: Program Film’s Era).
- 33 Kondō Kazuto, “Eiga kankyaku no dokusho jissen: 1920 nendai Nihon ni okeru eigakann puroguramu to ‘miru koto [Reading Practices of Audiences: Movie Theater Brochures during 1920s in Japan and the Way of Watching],” in *Journal of Mass Communication Studies* 87 (2015), 137–155.
- 34 David Scott Diffrient, *Omnibus Films: Theorizing Transauthorial Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 3–36.
- 35 Ozu Yasujirō, *Tokyo no onna*, 34’:55.
- 36 The term *tokudane* refers to success in obtaining and releasing information to the public before others do. It is a practice in Japanese public journalism that, as Yohtaro Hamada shows, often originated from close ties with governmental officials. Yohtaro Hamada, “Public Journalism in Japan Experiments by a National Paper,” in *International Journalism and Democracy: Civic Engagement Models from Around the World*, ed. Angela Romano (New York: Routledge, 2010), 101.
- 37 However, in many, if not most, cases, newsreels were part of the program.
- 38 Ozu Yasujirō, *Tokyo no onna*, 46’:28.
- 39 As Kondō mentions, studios released their films in big cities first, and, after a period of time, film theaters used the same prints in other locations throughout Japan.
- 40 Printed program from Eibusu Teikokukan. Personally reproduced by the author from his own collection.
- 41 Tōei Ogikubo printed pamphlet, April 30–May 6, 1958. Personally reproduced by the author from his own collection.
- 42 Tōhō Kokura’s chirashi. Personally reproduced by the author from his own collection.

- <sup>43</sup> Kitaura Hiroyuki, *Terebi seichōki no Nihon eiga: Media-kan kōshō no naka no dorama* (Nagoya-shi: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2018), 114–115.
- <sup>44</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 53.
- <sup>45</sup> For example, see: Roland Domenig, “A Brief History of Independent Cinema in Japan and the Role of the Art Theatre Guild,” in *Minikomi* 70 (2003), 3–4.
- <sup>46</sup> Shunya Yoshimi, “Television and Nationalism: Historical Change in the National Domestic TV Formation of Postwar Japan,” in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6.4 (2003), 464.
- <sup>47</sup> Ropponmatsu Tōei News. Personally reproduced by the author from his own collection.
- <sup>48</sup> Yamato Tōei *nyūsu*. Personally reproduced by the author from his own collection.
- <sup>49</sup> Furuta Hisateru, “Terebijon hōsō ni okeru eiga no hensen,” in *The Seijo Bungei: Seijo University Arts and Literature Quarterly* 196 (2006), 254–258.
- <sup>50</sup> Furuta Hisateru, *Tetsuan Atomu no jidai: Eizō sangyō no kōbō* (Tokyo: Sekai Shisōsha, 2009).
- <sup>51</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Vol. 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles (London/New York: Verso, 2004 [Originally appeared in French in 1960, this translation was first published in 1976]), 221.
- <sup>52</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Ibid.*, xx.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.
- <sup>54</sup> For more on this idea see, Kitaura (2018), 104–113.