


# Japan and the “Transnational Cinema”

Marcos P. Centeno Martín <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Nori Morita <sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Cultures and Languages, School of Arts, Birkbeck, University of London, London WC1E 7HX, UK

<sup>2</sup> Graduate School of International Culture and Communication, Waseda University, Tokyo 169-8050, Japan

\* Correspondence: m.centeno@bbk.ac.uk (M.P.C.M.); norm@waseda.jp (N.M.)

Received: 27 March 2020; Accepted: 12 April 2020; Published: 17 April 2020



Since the Western “discovery” of Japanese cinema in the 1950s, there has been a tendency among both Film Studies and Japanese Studies scholars to draw on essentialist visions of Japanese Cinema, understating its uniqueness as a consequence of its isolation from the rest of the world. In other words, Japanese Cinema has often been regarded as an inseparable part of Japan’s unique culture, and film scholars have been making tremendous efforts to prove that Japanese Cinema developed independently of Western forms of cinematic representation. One of the earliest examples of this “Oriental turn” can be found in Burch’s influential text *To the Distant Observer* (1979), which highlighted how the evolution of Japanese film was thickly informed by its own cultural heritage and developed in correlation with its artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical traditions. This critical tendency of trying to find in Japanese cinema a way of filmmaking alternative to Hollywood’s was consistent with what filmmakers of New Waves and Third Cinemas in the 1960s and 70s aimed at and practiced.

Any film critics and historians emphasising “national” essence in Japanese films are prone to conceptual mistakes: such reductive views lead to the underestimation of filmmakers’ full artistic creativity. Such an arbitrary stance results in neglecting the complex interactions of local, transnational and global cinematic components. Cinema has been international since its inception, and in this sense Japanese cinema, one of the oldest in the world, is not an exception. The paradigm of “National Cinema” started to be increasingly called into question from the late 1980s (Higson 1989; Elsaesser 1989), and soon new methodological approaches to Japanese cinema, too, started to be proposed by various scholars (Gerow 1993; Andrew and Raine 1993; Iwamoto 1993), which helped bring understanding of the contradictions and fault lines of “distant observers” and cast light on the dialectical relationships in filming practice, and film theory and criticism between Japan and the rest of the world.

During the last decade, the concept of transnationality in cinema has pervaded Film Studies, and in 2010 a new journal, *Transnational Cinemas*, was launched to host the ongoing discussions in this field. Ezra and Rowden (2006) pioneered the theorization of transnational film, which has been followed by studies engaged in nailing down the meanings of transnational cinema (Hjort 2010; Higbee and Lim 2010; Ezra and Rowden 2006; Berry 2010; Higbee and Lim 2010). Other authors have embarked on projects dismantling national boundaries from various different angles and come up with a variety of terms for “transnational cinema” such as “global cinema” (Galt and Schoonover 2010), “impure cinema” (Nagib 2019), “multicultural [cinema]” (Kō 2009), the “transcultural [cinema]” (Lau 2002), “diasporic cinema” (Petty 2008; Berghahn and Sternberg 2010), “accented cinema” (Naficy 2001) and “translocal imagination” (Miyao 2019). Concurrently with these theoretical discussions, studies applying “transnationality” to Japanese film have proliferated in recent years (Miyao 2007, 2017; Baskett 2008; Tezuka 2011; Brizio-Skov 2016; Dorman 2016; Dew 2016; Centeno Martín 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Centeno Martín and Morita 2020). This *Arts* Special Issue expands contemporary discussions of transnational Japanese cinema by proposing new theoretical frameworks, analytical methodologies and critical approaches. Our aim is to challenge the old “national” paradigm by highlighting the

limitations of studying Japanese film as a cinematic phenomenon confined to its national borders. Is Japanese cinema National Cinema? To what extent is Japanese cinema Japanese?

This publication emerges as part of a collaborative project entitled “Japanese Transnational Cinema” led by Birkbeck College, University of London and Waseda University in Tokyo. Partial results were presented in two symposia: one held at Birkbeck in May 2019 and one at Waseda in July 2019. These international meetings were possible thanks to generous support from institutions such as Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation; Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation; MEXT-Top Global University Project Fund; as well as to the collaboration of scholars from other universities such as SOAS, Kyoto University, Nagoya University, Ochanomizu University and Sugiyama Jogakuen University.

As has been noted, there is no single definition for transnational cinema (Shaw 2013; Centeno Martín and Morita 2020), and we do not claim any single methodology as a variety of approaches to the transnational are beneficial in assessing all aspects of this increasingly complex phenomenon. It will be more productive to understand the “transnational” as an area of theoretical inquiry, that is, transnational film theory (Fisher and Smith 2020), than to seek the definitive notion of it. The papers represented here propose innovative approaches to Japanese cinema, surpassing narrow “national” perspectives that neglect the extraordinary transnationality and even global nature of Japanese film in terms of its aesthetics, narratives and theoretical approaches, as well as its production, consumption and distribution systems.

We should not forget that there have been and are, even now, very active international flows in Japan of images, stories, iconographies and theories. As many papers in this volume note, even films considered as milestones of Japanese National Cinema were clearly exposed to foreign influences, such as those of Kurosawa Akira (Martinez 2018), Mizoguchi Kenji and Ozu Yasujiro (Centeno Martín 2018), Yoshida Yoshishige (De Vargas 2019) or Kawase Naomi (Schoneveld 2019). Most of the articles included in this Issue question whether external influences and Japanese film uniqueness are compatible or not, or to what extent Japanese specificity is compromised by foreign codes of representation.

Cross-cultural representation is also part of cinema’s transnationality and issues, raising the following questions: What misrecognition and misrepresentation surface when Japan is represented as ‘other’ from outside (Mestre Pérez 2018) or when the rest of the world is represented by Japan (Kirsch 2019)?; How has the global cultural flow shaped Japanese creativity? (Kawashima 2019; Muñoz-Garnica 2018; Martinez 2018; Centeno Martín 2018). In addition, the film industry has developed complex structures, and the way it operates cannot be completely understood without taking into account its increasing transnational characteristics in production, distribution and consumption (Mestre Pérez 2018; Schoneveld 2019). Questioned, in that sense, is the extent to which films can still be regarded as products of a national domestic market when they are distributed and consumed in the transnational or even global market (Centeno Martín 2018; Martinez 2018). Additionally, Frisch (2019) points out the possibility that Japanese aesthetic and cultural traditions might provide useful tools to renew film theories that have traditionally been dominated by the Western canon of writings and create theoretical frameworks from a transnational perspective. The papers in this Issue present innovative analytical approaches that could unravel cultural complexities of films in a transnational context and propose to assess Japanese and transnational cinematic phenomena from several different perspectives.

Centeno Martín (2018) provides theoretical background to the notion of “national cinema” and discusses the contradictions that are caused when this paradigm is applied to the Japanese case. His article illustrates that what makes Japanese films Japanese are imaginarily created by the Western gaze, which is often blind to transnational influences on Japanese filmmakers. Centeno Martín shows how the idea of “Japanese National Cinema” was originally articulated from outside and presents evidence to prove the weight of Hollywood in Japanese domestic films. Kawashima (2019) explores how metamorphosis becomes a transmedia and transcultural trope and is employed by Yamamura Koji for his *Franz Kafka’s A Country Doctor* based on the Kafka’s short story. This article calls into question the national paradigm as, while metamorphosis is a frequently used motif in Japanese animated films, Yamamura’s *A Country Doctor* remains outside the Japanese film culture and instead relies on European

aesthetic and philosophical traditions. Kawashima describes Yamamura's animation as an example of transnational cinema, which both adapts and renews foreign cultural elements at the same time. [De Vargas \(2019\)](#) questions the validity of the national cinema model by claiming that films should be assessed not in relation to national identities but rather political affiliations. Rather than studying the national culture in a film, his article proposes to analyse certain national ideologies that the film is aligned with. De Vargas uses Yoshida Kijū's *Eros + Massacre* (1969) to illustrate how the Japanese New Wave can be understood as a result of the filmmakers' alliances with the New Left movement from the late 1950s.

[Mestre Pérez \(2018\)](#) explores a cinematic phenomenon that moves across national boundaries through *Gisaku* (2005), the Spanish animation film about the Japanese European mission in the 17th century. This film projects a positive image of Spain and reverts predemocratic and premodern images of this country. This case study becomes a unique transnational attempt because it demonstrates the film is designed to meet national interests, while ironically it is made by transnational working teams and targeted at the Japanese audience. Mestre Pérez also defines film as a transcultural production, which seeks channels of interaction between Japan and Spain in order to enhance cultural transferability. Her study then presents a Spanish "national" image that is consumed internationally and may be continuously adapted and renewed. [Frisch \(2019\)](#) challenges Western paradigms used in film theory by introducing concepts rooted in the East Asian aesthetic and cultural tradition. This article draws on Ryōsuke Ōhashi's theoretical work to show how the notion of *kire* in Japanese traditional art and theatre becomes a useful epistemological tool in analysing bodily movements of film actors and the transitory and ephemeral nature of cinematic images. Frisch proposes a sort of transcultural approach for film theory, and illustrates how concepts that originated in Japanese cultural tradition, such as cut-continuity (*kire-tsuzuki*), shift (*zure*) or incompleteness, can be applied not only to Japanese arts (such as *ikebana* or theatre) but also to both Japanese and international films.

Since his discovery in the West in the 1950s, nobody had been regarded as a "national" filmmaker as much as Kurosawa Akira, and the focus of the study on his films was mainly on his "Japaneseness." Recent scholarship, however, has shifted towards the transnationality of his films, and [Martinez's \(2018\)](#) paper is one of the invaluable contributions to the reappraisal of Kurosawa's closer association with Western cultural traditions and values. Her insight into Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth* makes it unquestionable that the story of Washizu and Asaji's sense of guilt in *The Throne of Blood*, retold as if it were a Buddhist morality play, also has a strong affinity with Christian notions of guilt.

Ri Kōran (Yamaguchi Yoshiko, aka. *Li Xianglan*) was a rare "transnational" star in the prewar and wartime periods, but no audience had known that she was an ethnic Japanese playing roles of nothing but Chinese characters till her true ethnicity was revealed after the end of WWII. [Kirsch \(2019\)](#) investigates how this ethnic ambiguity hides some ideological complexity by closely examining two cinema texts, *Suzhou Night* and *Sayon's Bells*, both of which star Yamaguchi. Her article discusses the implications of featuring this figure in war-time films: The Japanese Empire was traditionally envisaged as male, while its colonies such as China and Korea were envisaged as female; Li Xianglan on screen was a colonized subject, while Yamaguchi Yoshiko was in reality a colonizing one.

Suwa Atsuhiko is an undeniable Europhile, and has made films as if they were homages to European film and culture, particularly French ones. [Muñoz-Garnica \(2018\)](#) selects two of Suwa's most European films—*H Story* and *A Perfect Couple*—and closely traces the ways in which the first is embedding the story and narrative situation of *Hiroshima mon amour* and the second those of Rossellini's *Journey into Italy* as if they were *mise en abyme*. That *H Story* is a virtual remake of *Hiroshima mon amour* is clearly noticeable by everybody who has seen the film, but Japanese film critics and audiences largely miss the *mise en abyme* structure of *A Perfect Couple*.

One of the most successful Japanese film directors in international film festivals, and whose films are considered to have great appeal for international audiences, is Kawase Naomi, but [Schoneveld \(2019\)](#) demonstrates that her major works such as *Suzaku*, *Shara* and *Mogari* are inextricably tied to a specific Japanese locality, particularly Nara where she comes from, and her personal identity as Japan's female

film author. According to Schoneveld, these films are her “cinema of place,” which are also a spatial metaphor for her position as a female film director in Japan.

In general, all these articles illustrate the need to reformulate the old paradigm of “national cinema”, as films in general and Japanese Cinema in particular often expand beyond national borders. This approach should not undermine the weight of Japanese film tradition but, on the contrary, should help us to contextualize it properly within the global culture of images.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Andrew, Dudley, and Michael J. Raine. 1993. Japanese Image Culture. *Iris* 16: 3–9.
- Baskett, Michael. 2008. *The Attractive Empire: Transnational Film Culture in Imperial Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Berghahn, Daniela, and Claudia Sternberg. 2010. *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berry, Chris. 2010. What is Transnational Cinema? Thinking from the Chinese Situation. *Transnational Cinemas* 1: 2. [CrossRef]
- Brizio-Skov, Flavia. 2016. Examples of National and Transnational Cinema: Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* and Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars*. *Cultural and Religious Studies* 4: 141–60. [CrossRef]
- Centeno Martín, Marcos P. 2016. Transcultural Corporeity in *Taiyōzoku* Youth Cinema. Some Notes on the Contradictions of Japaneseness in the Economic Miracle. In *Körperinszenierungen im japanischen Film/Presentation of Bodies in Japanese Films*. Edited by Andreas Becker and Kayo Adachi-Rabe. Frankfurt: Büchner-Verlag, pp. 143–60.
- Centeno Martín, Marcos P. 2017a. Del Viaje del Turista Al Viaje del Héroe. Mimesis Cinematográfica del Discurso Turístico Japonés Sobre España. El Caso de Andarushia (2011). *MIRAI Estudios Japoneses* 1: 89–107. [CrossRef]
- Centeno Martín, Marcos P. 2017b. Centeno Martín, Marcos P. 2017b. Transnational Circulation of Images of the Pacific War (1941–1945): The Japanese Empire Seen through Spanish Newsreels. *Irish Journal of Asian Studies (IJAS)* 3: 1–13.
- Centeno Martín, Marcos P. 2018. Centeno Martín, Marcos P. 2018. Introduction. The Misleading Discovery of Japanese National Cinema. *Arts* 7: 87. [CrossRef]
- Centeno Martín, Marcos P. 2019. Challenging Eurocentric Surveys. The Transnational Topic in Film Studies. *JCMS Teaching Dossier* 5 (Revisiting the Film History Survey): 1–5.
- Centeno Martín, Marcos P., and Norimasa Morita. 2020. Introduction: Japanese film beyond its national borders. In *Japan Beyond its Borders: Transnational Approaches to Film and Media*. Edited by Marcos P. Centeno Martín and Morita Nori. Tokyo: Seibunsha, pp. 1–17.
- De Vargas, Ferran. 2019. Japan's New Left and New Wave. An Ideology's Perspective as an Alternative to That of National Cinema. *Arts* 8: 1. [CrossRef]
- Dew, Oliver. 2016. *Zainichi Cinema Korean-in-Japan Film Culture*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Dorman, Andrew. 2016. *Paradoxical Japaneseness Cultural Representation in 21st Century Japanese Cinema*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 1989. *New German Cinema: A History*. Hampshire: British Film Institute.
- Ezra, Elizabeth, and Terry Rowden. 2006. General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema? In *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden. London: Routledge, pp. 1–12.
- Fisher, Austin, and Iain Robert Smith. 2020. Transnational Cinemas: A Critical Roundtable. *Frames Cinema Journal*. Available online: [https://framescinemajournal.com/article/transnational-cinemas-a-critical-roundtable/#\\_ftnref14](https://framescinemajournal.com/article/transnational-cinemas-a-critical-roundtable/#_ftnref14) (accessed on 27 March 2020).
- Frisch, Simon. 2019. The Aesthetics of Flow and Cut in the Way of Film: Towards Transnational Transfers of East Asian Concepts to Western Film Theory. *Arts* 8: 119. [CrossRef]
- Galt, Rosalind, and Karl Schoonover. 2010. Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema. In *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*. Edited by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–29.
- Gerow, Aaron. 1993. Celluloid Masks: The Cinematic Image and the Image of Japan. *Iris* 16: 23–36.

- Higbee, Will, and Song Hwee Lim. 2010. Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies. *Transnational Cinemas* 1: 7–21. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Higson, Andrew. 1989. The Concept of National Cinema. *Screen* 30: 36–46. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hjort, Mette. 2010. On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism. In *World Cinema, Transnational Perspectives*. Edited by Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen Newman. London: Routledge and American Film Institute Reader, pp. 12–33.
- Iwamoto, Kenji. 1993. Japanese Cinema Until 1930: A Consideration of its Formal Aspects. *Iris* 16: 9–23.
- Kawashima, Kentaro. 2019. Metamorphosis as Origin—Koji Yamamura’s Short Animation Franz Kafka’s A Country Doctor. *Arts* 8: 54. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kirsch, Griseldis. 2019. Gendering the Japanese Empire: Ri Kōran as ‘Transnational’ Star? *Arts* 8: 153. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kō, Mika. 2009. *Japanese Cinema and Otherness: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and the Problem of Japaneseness*. London: Routledge.
- Lau, Jenny Kwok Wah. 2002. *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Martinez, Dolores P. 2018. From ‘Scottish’ Play to Japanese Film: Kurosawa’s Throne of Blood. *Arts* 7: 50. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Mestre Pérez, Rosanna. 2018. Japan in Spain. Japanese Culture through Spanish Eyes in the Film Gisaku. *Arts* 7: 93. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Miyao, Daisuke. 2007. *Sessue Hayakawa: Silent Cinema and Transnational Stardom*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Miyao, Daisuke. 2017. Chapter 3: À Travers: The Cinematography of Depth in Japan. In *Transnational Cinematography Studies*. Edited by Lindsay Coleman, Daisuke Miyao and Roberto Schaefer. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 55–75.
- Miyao, Daisuke. 2019. How can we talk about ‘transnational’ when we talk about Japanese cinema? *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 11: 109–16. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Muñoz-Garnica, Miguel. 2018. Intertextuality and Mise en Abyme in Nobuhiro Suwa’s H Story and A Perfect Couple. Between European Modernity and Japan. *Arts* 7: 57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Naficy, Hamid. 2001. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nagib, Lucia. 2019. *Impure Cinema Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Petty, Sheila, ed. 2008. *Contact Zones: Memory, Origin, and Discourses in Black Diasporic Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Schoneveld, Erin. 2019. Naomi Kawase’s “Cinema of Place”. *Arts* 8: 43. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Shaw, Deborah. 2013. Deconstructing and Reconstructing Transnational Cinema. In *Contemporary Hispanic Cinema: Interrogating the Transnational in Spanish and Latin American Film*. Edited by Stephanie Dennison. Woodbridge: Tamesis.
- Tezuka, Yoshiharu. 2011. *Japanese Cinema Goes Global: Filmworkers’ Journeys*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.



© 2020 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).