In 2013, I was hired at a North American university to fill a position designated as assistant professor of “Theories of Film and Media.” My primary task was to teach an intensive lecture course on the history of film theory, a course that all the film and media studies majors in our program must take and pass before their graduation. I learned a lot from teaching both classical and contemporary texts in film theory, but this teaching experience also put me in a difficult situation when I started thinking how I might improve the quality of this course by incorporating my own specialty: Japanese cinema. Because the English-language textbooks I used in that course—Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen’s *Film Theory and Criticism*, Bill Nichols’s *Movies and Methods*, Dudley Andrew’s *The Major Film Theories*, Toby Miller and Robert Stam’s *A Companion to Film Theory*, and Marc Furstenau’s *The Film Theory Reader*—cover only theoretical texts written in European languages (including Russian), I was only able to assign some well-known Japanese films by Ozu Yasujirō, Kurosawa Akira, and Mizoguchi Kenji to be analyzed by means of those canonical Western theories.¹

After several occasions of teaching the course, I came to ask myself a series of questions regarding the discursive conditions that both inform and determine what we call “theory” in our discipline. Why, for instance, do we still distinguish between the West and the non-West in terms of knowledge production, always granting the former a privileged power to disseminate authentic accounts of cinema and its related phenomena? Is it valid to maintain such a rigid geographical divide, given that film was invented and then circulated as a modern medium to travel across the world? What do we really mean by the term *theory*, especially

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¹ Introduction

*Realism, Film Theory, Japanese Cinema*
when we admit that a variety of nonacademic publications such as film reviews, short essays, and art and political manifestos comprise the basis of so-called classical film theory? Was there any qualitative or incommensurable difference between Western and non-Western critics in their adoptions of this particular mode of writing? If not, what might we gain by exposing hitherto neglected archives of non-Western film theories in an effort to redefine the very meaning of the global in twentieth-century modernity and its particular mode of cultural production?

This book offers my tentative answer to these pedagogical questions. It examines how generations of Japanese intellectuals from the early 1910s to the late 1950s—the period usually designated “classical” in film history—developed their theorizations of cinema in parallel with their Western counterparts. Of the many topics discussed during this time period, I have chosen realism to be the primary focus of my inquiry, partly because realism, whether treated positively or negatively, has always preoccupied the mind of film theorists. But a more specific reason lies in the ways in which Japanese cinema has been studied in the Anglo-American context. In his influential 1979 book *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, Noël Burch famously argued that Japanese cinema had long been immune to “the ideology of ‘realism’” thanks to the visual languages it inherited from local traditional theaters such as Kabuki and Noh. Furthermore, to emphasize the alterity of Japanese film culture in general, Burch went so far as to declare that “the very notion of theory is alien to Japan: it is considered a property of Europe and the West.”

We should, of course, keep in mind that Burch strategically presented his argument as part of his ideological critique of Hollywood cinema’s mesmerizing capitalist illusionism. And yet a critique of Burch’s own illusion has also been long overdue, which is why I deliberately illuminate and scrutinize the existence of Japanese theorizations of cinematic realism. Even a glimpse at local film criticism in prewar and wartime Japan helps justify my revisionist approach. Beginning with the emergence of film journalism in the 1910s, Japanese filmmakers and critics had been eager to catch up with, discuss, and transform the latest ideas and techniques imported from abroad. As a consequence, major works in classical film theory, including that of Hugo Münsterberg, Béla Balázs, Jean Epstein, Rudolf Arnheim, and members of the Soviet montage school, had become available in Japanese by the mid-1930s. Such timely translations of foreign texts, in turn, stimulated the continuous publication of theoretical books and articles written in Japanese, although these minor theories have yet to find their place in the current scholarship of both film theory and Japanese cinema. I hope to remedy this absence in the pages that follow. But in so doing, I also explicate the inherently hybrid, transnational nature of Japanese film culture.
NON-WESTERN THEORY AS PRAXIS

While several attempts were made to launch college-level film programs beginning in the 1920s, it is understood that film studies as we know it today is a product of the anti-establishment movement of 1968 and the years following. In fact, Burch, as well as the majority of film scholars during that period, strove to elevate the status of this newly established discipline by incorporating what seemed to be the most radical and iconoclastic ideas circulating in contemporary thought, namely, Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. These new approaches, often labeled as French poststructuralist theory, appeared as an alternative or the latest addition to preexisting analytical frameworks in other already established disciplines. But in film studies, they came to occupy the dominant place in its critical discourse and curricula, forming the foundation for what we call “theory” in our discipline. In addition, the history of film theory has equally privileged a particular lineage of the French intellectual tradition—including André Bazin, Christian Metz, and apparatus theory—with occasional or later additions of German, Russian, and Anglo-American inputs. Consequently, as Markus Nornes has observed, anyone attending introductory courses on film theory at North American universities would inevitably have the impression that “serious film criticism and theory are the exclusive domain of the West.”

Thus the exclusion of non-Western film theory was deeply embedded within the historical formation of film studies as an academic discipline, a problem that has been a subject of debate among scholars over the past decades. With the rise of postcolonial studies in the 1980s, scholars such as Teshome H. Gabriel, Homi K. Bhabha, and Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto took issue with the unilateral, indiscriminate application of Western canonical theory to non-Western film practices. According to their criticism, the unabashed Eurocentrism that characterizes our critical discourse is not simply a matter of spatial segregation; it also has a temporal dimension. While the West tends to identify itself as an ahistorical and transcendental entity through its dedication to the creation of theory as a universal discourse, any critical or theoretical discourse produced in the non-West is always confined within its own spatial and temporal limitations, serving merely as an object for area-specific historical research.

Around the same time, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll similarly criticized the domination of contemporary film theory by what they called “Grand Theory” or “Big Theories of Everything” that originated in France. Retrospectively, their inventions appear to us as attempts to increase the visibility of Anglo-American traditions in analytic philosophy by providing recourse to the fact-based interpretation of the viewer’s normative cognitive behaviors. Nonetheless, they also suggested that scholars take part in “empirical studies of filmmakers, genres, and national
cinemas” to prove that “an argument can be at once conceptually powerful and based in evidence without appeal to theoretical bricolage or association of ideas.” The 1990s and 2000s saw what one could call the “empirical turn,” which was best represented in the upsurge of early cinema studies. This was also the case in the studies of Japanese cinema, where a new generation of scholars equipped with language skills produced a number of innovative works using a variety of primary sources excavated through extensive archival research. While these new studies were indispensable in proving the existence of a rich and long tradition of Japanese film criticism, they remained relatively silent as to how we assess those local writings in the broader, transnational context of the history of film theory.

More recently, there have emerged monographs and edited volumes that pay special attention to previously underrepresented genealogies of non-Western film theory and criticism. Speaking only of those dealing with Japan and China, one could name works such as Aaron Gerow’s “Decentering Theory: Reconsidering the History of Japanese Film Theory,” Yuriko Furuhata’s Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics, Victor Fan’s Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory, and Jessica Ka Yee Chan’s Chinese Revolutionary Cinema: Propaganda, Aesthetics, and Internationalism, 1949–1966. These publications, on the one hand, squarely respond to D. N. Rodowick’s call for attaining “a more conceptual picture of how film became associated with theory in the early twentieth century, and how ideas of theory vary in different historical periods and national contexts.” But, on the other hand, they are equally motivated to address the shifting identity of what we call “cinema” in today’s media environment. As nearly every aspect of film production, distribution, and exhibition becomes digitalized through the proliferation of new media platforms, it becomes imperative to revisit the question “What is cinema?” And precisely because the major film theories, premised on the ontological stability of the photographic image, have proved to be inadequate for addressing this question in earnest, film scholars in the twenty-first century have begun to explore different sets of discourses on the experience of moving images, focusing in particular on those developed either before or outside the institutionalization of film studies. The concomitant revival of classical film theory in the past decade must also be read in this light.

The primary task for anyone working on non-Western film theory is to clarify how we could, or should, define the term theory in a given geopolitical context. In this respect, Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten, editors of the recently published Media Theory in Japan, offer us a very useful insight. To begin with, Steinberg and Zahlten problematize what they view as Western media scholars’ obsession with Japan as one of the most influential sources of modern audiovisual media practice on the globe, a posture that in turn underscores their collective ignorance of the existence of local critical discourses regarding such practice. Media theory, to say the least, has equally been treated as the exclusive domain of
the West. As a methodological guide for their own articulation of “media theory in Japan,” the editors draw upon Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet’s earlier commitment to the “creolization of theory.” The objective of this project was to promote indigenous theoretical activities taking place in formerly colonized areas by consciously rejecting our commonplace understanding of (Western) theory as a universal discourse. In their attempt at deconstructing theory, creolization also means “pluralization.” “Without being Theory with a capital T,” argue Shih and Lionnet, “theory can engage with the objects of one’s analysis in multiple ways and to different levels of intensity. When objects of analysis are not simple instances and illustrations of theory and are not made to conform to theory, theory as such performs a very different function.”

Steinberg and Zahlten refer to the “thought of the aughts” (zeronendai no shisō) group as an example of such non-Theoretical media theories in Japan. Represented by critics such as Ōtsuka Eiji and Azuma Hiroki, this loosely connected group of writers elaborates a series of theoretical and sometimes philosophical analyses of Japanese media culture, placing anime and subculture at its center. But the main agenda and the platform of the group are palpably different from those of media theorists in Europe and the United States. First, those associated with the group seldom use academic journals as the venue for their intellectual outputs but rely instead upon public forums generated through the internet. Second, they create discursive tools for interpretation through their active participation in the cultural phenomena or media events they analyze. The significance of this group is not limited to its ability to provide an alternative to “Theory” through their collective emphasis on local specificities and the vernacular. The group also blurs the categorical distinction between theory and practice, effectively making the role of both media producers and consumers the very act of theorizing. Following this symptomatic mutation of the meaning and function of theory in the Japanese context, Steinberg and Zahlten declare that their volume of “essays proposes to make this shift from media theory as universal to media theory as a practice composed of local, medium-specific, and culture-inflected practices.”

I agree with Steinberg and Zahlten in that we need to provide a more nuanced and informed analysis of cultural, historical, and institutional aspects of theory production. However, I would also like to complicate their conception of Japanese media theory as a practice by taking into account the specific conditions surrounding classical film theory. Because their work appeared before the establishment of film studies as a discipline, most contributors of classical film theory were writing outside the traditional realm of academic institutions. In most cases, these theorists were also practitioners, as they often developed their ideas through actual filmmaking or constant viewing of films. This situation led to what Rodowick calls the “rarity of theory,” meaning that the best theoretical insights during the classical period in film history were usually scattered across many different writing styles.
Introduction

and publishing formats rather than neatly presented in monographs. It is thus possible to say that film studies has already long engaged in pluralizing “theory,” to the extent that it enshrines as its own canons a variety of non-theoretical texts published in the form of poetic prose (Jean Epstein), written manifesto (Dziga Vertov), cultural criticism (Siegfried Kracauer), film review (Bazin) in addition to those akin to the more traditional sense of academic writing (Hugo Münsterberg, Belá Balázs, and Rudolf Arnheim).

This idiosyncratic status of classical film theory as both a vernacular and a practical discourse requires another level of reflection when it comes to Japanese theorizations of cinema. What should we do if the pluralization of “Theory” into “theories” is not sufficient enough to differentiate Japanese film theory from its Western counterpart? Does it mean that we have to come up with another alternative to the now common practice of treating the indigenous discourse building in historically understudied ethnic or sexuality groups as examples of the creolization of theory? How might we establish a reflexive and constructive comparative method to assess non-Western film and media theories that display not only divergence but also unmistakable proximity to Western canons?

TWO APPROACHES TO JAPANESE FILM THEORY

In recently published studies of Japanese film theory, two approaches address these methodological challenges. The first is what I call “interpretive comparison.” This approach makes Japanese theoretical texts intelligible on a common and familiar ground for comparison. It then confers upon some of the finest Japanese writings a full-fledged eligibility to be called a “theory” in the traditional sense. One example is Gavin Walker’s reading of film essays by the Japanese Marxist thinker Tosaka Jun. At the beginning of his essay, Walker cautiously reminds us that his main objective is “to examine the development of the filmic moment in Tosaka’s philosophy rather than to examine the specific historical circumstance and historical trajectory of film theory in Japan of the 1920s and 1930s.” Faithful to this opening remark, his argument makes frequent references to a cluster of contemporary philosophers including Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jacques Rancière, and Alain Badiou, as well as Paul Virilio, Susan Buck-Morss, and César Guimarães. Walker’s interpretation of Tosaka goes like this: “Essentially, he [Tosaka] is drawing our attention to the fact that ‘in the prosthetic cognition of the cinema, the difference between documentary and fiction is thus effaced. . . . ’ In other words, what Tosaka argues essentially is that film constitutes ‘a place of intrinsic indiscernability [sic] between art and non-art.”

In this passage, the first quotation comes from Buck-Morss’s “The Cinema Screen as Prosthesis of Perception” and the second from Badiou’s Infinite Thought. The problem here is not simply that one could mistakenly take these quotations as Tos-
ka's own statement; it also makes us wonder whether Walker's interpretative comparison here helps to confirm Shih and Lionnet's concern that objects of analysis from the non-West—in this case, Tosaka's own theoretical writing—are more often than not used as "simple instances and illustrations of theory [with a capital T]."20

Like Walker, I will compare Japanese and Western theorists and sometimes eulogize the excellence and innovation of the former. Nevertheless, I also find it necessary to critically reflect on the very use of comparison as a method with the aid of recent discussions in the field of comparative literature. In her 2006 book *The Age of the World Target*, Rey Chow undertakes the difficult task of establishing "a fundamentally different set of terms for comparative literary studies" appropriate for the twenty-first century.21 Although originally conceived in the late nineteenth century as a transnational project of disseminating the cosmopolitan ideal of "world literature," comparative literature as a discipline became ideologically problematic in its next hundred years of history, since it always placed literature as understood in Europe as a "grid of intelligibility," or the "common ground" for comparison.22 The problem with this traditional comparative method is that it tends to render incongruous differences found in non-Western literary texts as mere examples of "chronologically more recent variations to be incorporated into a familiar grid of reference."23

A simple denial of this grid of intelligibility does not help us much here, for it inevitably brings studies of non-Western literature back to the nativist discourse of national or ethnic integrity. For this reason, Chow suggests that we instead treat both culturally and geographically specific formations of non-Western modernity as "full-fledged comparative projects." That is, even if a non-Western writer we study was completely monolingual and had never been abroad, her creative work was written and read in a discursive situation that required her to involve a self-reflexive comparison between herself (as well as her living situation) and the overwhelming presence of Europe and North America in modern world politics. This revised usage and understanding of the term *comparison* does not prevent us from comparing two or more writers from different parts of the world. It simply adds to our comparative method "a critique of the uneven distribution of cultural capital among languages themselves," as Chow explains.24

One could find a good example of this kind of internalized comparison in Aaron Gerow's concept of the "theory complex," which I refer to as the second approach to Japanese film theory. According to Gerow, the theory complex designates a "symptom of non-Western modernity" shared among Japanese intellectuals who, in the midst of their country's modernization project, expressed self-contradictory, or even schizophrenic, attitudes toward "theory" due to their full recognition of both the attractions and foreignness of this newly imported term.25 In the discursive history of Japanese cinema, therefore, theory is at once needed and rejected because it has always been the subject of the constant comparison
between the West and the rest, or between things (presumed to be) Japanese and non-Japanese.

Let us first see how the notion of theory has been rejected historically in the Japanese context. In 1941, the filmmaker Itami Mansaku expressed his total disagreement with the then popular belief that Soviet montage theory represents the sole essence of filmmaking. As a director specializing in the production of satires in the genre of period drama (jidaigeki), Itami was always critical of his fellow critics who blindly accepted and appreciated “theories of Western authorities” (Seiyō no erai hito no riron). The main target of Itami’s critique was Kurata Fumindo who, in his book On Film Script (Shinarioron), argued that all consecutive scenes in a film should be arranged in conflict with each other, as explained in Eisenstein’s theory of dialectical montage. As expected, Itami did not buy this argument because it was completely at odds with what he had learned from his firsthand experience as a film director: “To the degree that it is represented by its theory of collision . . . the true nature of theoretical debates on film montage seems not far from mere speculation. As a result, I somehow came to have an impression that it [Soviet montage theory] was an illegitimate child in film theory who tried to take over the orthodox lineage of composition by taking its methodological tricks to the extreme.” Itami admitted that his counterargument went no further than repeating the basic principles of classical film editing. But he nonetheless added that “a theory can never have the power to convince people unless it grasps a truth applicable to most cases,” and for this reason Itami refused to call Soviet montage theory a “theory” in its strict sense.

The film historian Satō Tadao presents a similar view in his 1977 monograph The History of Japanese Film Theory (Nihon eiga rironshi). Despite the self-evident title of his study, Satō begins by provocatively asking, “Did film theory exist in Japan?” (Nihon ni eiga riron wa attaka). And his answer is “no,” inasmuch as “individuals who have written in books on film theory in Japan have mainly authored translations introducing foreign film theory,” and as a result, “in Japan, unfortunately, very few individuals can be called film theorists.” Satō’s polemic here, however, does not really lament the total absence of “Japanese” film theory. Rather, he uses it to emphasize that we must employ an absolutely different conception of “theory” in order to illuminate the existence of a uniquely Japanese take on film theory. As Satō writes: “It is not that Japan has no original film theory. As I stated earlier, such an aesthetic tradition [of Japanese cinema] would not have been possible without its own film theory. . . . Unfortunately, however, Japanese film theory remains disorganized, buried in the word-of-mouth training at production studios, in the short essays and written interviews of directors and screenwriters, and in the film reviews written by critics.” According to Itami and Satō, then, only discourses born from the actual practice of domestic filmmaking can be genuinely called a “theory” in the Japanese context. This assertion, however, is not only historically inaccurate but to a large extent self-deceptive; both writers, in the end,
mobilized another critical framework to theorize the non-theoretical character of Japanese written or spoken accounts of cinema.

As I have already mentioned, the strong craving for film theory in Japan led to the translation of major classical film theories by the mid-1930s. But this translation fever also extended well into the work of minor theorists whose names were largely forgotten in the Anglo-American context, including V. O. Freeburg, Austin Lescarboura, Gilbert Seldes, Eric Elliot, and Fedor Stepun.32 Besides these works, prewar and wartime Japan had many local film magazines—including Kinema junpô (Movie Times), Eiga ōrai (Film Traffic), Eiga hyōron (Film Criticism), Eiga shūdan (Film Collective), and Nihon eiga (Japanese Cinema)—that featured lengthy critical essays penned by local critics and thinkers. And these periodicals were followed by hundreds of film books dealing with auteur theory, film sociology, proletarian culture, the impact of sound revolution, documentary films, and many other relevant issues. This specific discursive situation also made film theory a highly profitable subject in Japanese print journalism. Imamura Taihei, dubbed as the “best film scholar of our times” by his fellow critics, was able to publish nine monographs composed entirely of his theoretical writings on cinema during the years between 1938 and 1943. Such a local demand for film theory did not change much even after Japan’s defeat in World War II. In 1948, the editorial in the inaugural issue of Eiga kikan (Film Quarterly) declared the magazine’s dedication to theory in this new era as follows: “Because of the poverty of ‘theory,’ [Japanese] film criticism had been easily and willingly exploited for the propaganda of imperialism and, again, is now about to give itself to fascism in many ways. . . . Cinema has fifty years of history in which it has developed itself through its association with capital and by being rendered either integrated or collective art. To establish our ‘theory,’ we expect the cooperation among many with good sense and brains rather than the emergence of a single genius.”33

As these two conflicting attitudes testify, Gerow’s concept of the theory complex signifies a self-reflexive comparative method intrinsic to Japanese local discourse on film theory. Rather than submissively accepting “Theory” as the sole and unchangeable grid of intelligibility, Japanese intellectuals frequently challenged the proclaimed universality of Western film theories without splitting themselves from the common task of theorizing cinema and its related culture as a global phenomenon in the twentieth century. In this sense, I will follow Gerow’s conviction that any successful approach to the history of Japanese film theory must “consider at least partially how it performs theory at the same time that it is critical of the possibilities of theory itself.”34 Only on this condition, moreover, can we also reinvigorate classical comparativist aspirations to juxtapose Western and non-Western texts on the same “operating table.” The goal of the following chapters, therefore, is to expand this new horizon of comparison by treating Japanese film theory as a variety of writings that were at once constructing and
deconstructing the very act of theorization, or unfinished theories-in-the-making, through their constant and informed conversations with Western counterparts.

THE PARADOX OF REALISM

As shown in Burch’s glorification of an anti-realist Japanese cinema, film scholars in the post-1968 period shared a strong antagonism toward realism under the banner of “political modernism.”35 These scholars, on the one hand, harshly criticized Bazin’s earlier theorization of cinematic realism, condemning its “native” treatment of the existential bond between a sign and a referent in the photographic image as well as its ignorance of economic factors in both film production and consumption.36 On the other hand, they also vilified the regressive character of mainstream Hollywood films, arguing how this highly commodified form of mass entertainment helped reproduce dominant capitalist ideologies by imposing on the viewer a false subject position and endlessly deferring the fulfillment of his or her own desire.37 If, as Colin MacCabe asserted in 1974, the nineteenth-century realist novel succeeded in disseminating the value of bourgeois culture and society by means of its seemingly transparent narrative discourse, it is classical Hollywood cinema’s unobtrusive, almost invisible camerawork and editing style that promulgate the American domination of modern capitalism under the guise of “verisimilitude,” or more simply of “realism.”38

Unsurprisingly, such a hasty disavowal of realism in the discourse of film studies became the subject of criticism in the decades that followed. Dudley Andrew and Philip Rosen, for instance, argued that Bazin’s theorization of film’s ability to generate an impression of reality was far from a simple matter, but rather was elaborated through his engagement in the contemporary philosophical discussion of existentialism and phenomenology.39 By employing Sartre’s famous motto “existence proceeds essence,” Andrew, in particular, problematized the idealist attitude of poststructuralist film theory that aimed to deduce “what should be done from some abstract system” rather than observing and reflecting upon “what has been done in cinema.”40 Likewise, David Bordwell, in his study of the narratology of cinema, maintained that earlier attempts to liken Hollywood’s classical mode of enunciation to the nineteenth-century realist novel were both theoretically and empirically unacceptable because they did not take into account the cognitive difference between fictional prose and film in their presentations of the development of a plot.41

Such revisionist calls for a more careful interpretation of realist film theory became more urgent with the rise of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and digital imaging in film production since the 1990s. Although we as viewers know that the images generated through digital devices no longer require actual objects existing in the world as their referents, why do we still perceive strong “reality
effects” in watching them? In other words, how can we theorize the paradoxical ontology of digital imagery, which is at once referentially unreal but perceptually real? In addressing these new challenges, recent debates on cinematic realism have shifted their focus from the production to the reception of moving images, leading to the widespread popularity of phenomenological (also haptic and corporeal) approaches to the film experience. Recently, Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello point out that in the twenty-first century, “film theory has been re-energized with a whole set of new concepts, all of which concern in varying degrees the physicality of the audiovisual experience.” Furthermore, insofar as ongoing processes of globalization intensify the possibility of more intimate encounters between people and customs from different classes, ethnicities, and cultures, that physicality in world cinema has “now become visceral, carnal, corporeal, sensate, in short, more real (and realist) than ever.”

This increasing visibility of what one may call a “realist” turn in recent scholarship has prevented the theoretical treatment of cinematic realism from being monolithic and outdated. Nevertheless, most historiographies of the intersection of film and realism in the past century still leave us room for critical consideration and refinement. Why in film history has realism often been discussed in rivalry with modernism, as exemplified in the schematic dichotomies between the so-called formative tradition (Georges Méliès, Josef von Sternberg, the Soviet montage school) and the realist tradition (the Lumière Brothers, Erich von Stroheim, Robert Flaherty), as well as between postwar realism and post-1968 political modernism? How can we pin down the truly elusive nature of realism without losing its logical consistency as a concept? Should realism in film always be premised on the notion of medium specificity? Or is it necessary to take into consideration earlier and multiple definitions of realism developed in other art forms? Why have certain ideas of realism been associated with specific locales, such as French poetic realism and Italian neorealism? Finally, what makes it relevant, or even necessary, to recuperate Japanese contributions to the historical debates on cinematic realism?

To answer these questions within the context of film theory, I suggest first that we go back and see how Bazin originally defined realism in his seminal essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” In the section preceding his well-known account of the automatism of photography, Bazin states that there are at least two dominant notions of realism that developed in the realm of the visual and plastic arts. The first, which he calls “aesthetic (or true) realism,” aims to offer the expression of spiritual reality through the symbol, an expression that is more true and meaningful to the idea, or the internal landscape of the mind; the second, “psychological (or pseudo-) realism,” is achieved through the duplication of the external world, where the need for the illusions of visual semblance transcends its essence. Drawing on this remark, moreover, Bazin cautions the reader that in every discussion of realism “we are faced with two different phenomena and these any objective
critic must view separately if he is to understand the evolution of the pictorial. Bazin attributes the coexistence of these two phenomena in the practice and discourse of realism to the conflict between style and likeness in realist painting, and in so doing he implies that his notion of cinematic realism is premised not on the simple extension or sophistication of one of these phenomena but rather on the dialectical relationship between the two.

The paradox of realism that appeared in Bazin’s “ontology” essay is given a further interrogation in Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*. According to Williams, the earliest use of the term *realism* in English derived from the medieval philosophical school known as the Realists, whose doctrine had almost nothing to do with what we usually associate with the term in today’s usage. In opposing the Nominalists’ denial of transcendental universal Ideas and Forms and acceptance of the existence of individual objects, this school insisted that “these universal Forms and Ideas were held either to exist independently of the objects in which they were perceived, or to exist in such objects as their constituting properties.” Although this doctrine itself was marginalized over time, it nonetheless provided a conceptual basis for a major conceptualization of realism as indicating or revealing the “reality underlying appearances.” On the other hand, since the fifteenth century, the term *realism*, and also its adjective form *real*, for that matter, came to signify an almost reverse phenomenon by adopting the meaning of the Latin word *res*, visible and tangible “things” as such. Consequently, Williams argues, “Real, from the beginning, has had this shifting double sense,” which ultimately led to the coexistence of two contradictory definitions of realism still operative up to the present—that is, “in the sense of an underlying truth or quality” and “in the (often opposed) sense of concrete . . . existence.” Williams’s etymological account of realism here is very useful in foregrounding this term’s complicated relations with other related philosophical concepts: While in its earliest usage *realism* designated a position similar to that of *idealism*, the second and more recent usage of the term came to signify its undeniable affinity with *materialism*.

Like Bazin and Williams, Fredric Jameson also argues that the specificity of realism as a critical concept lies in its paradoxical claim, its seemingly impossible attempt to fulfill both aesthetic and epistemological vocations at one and the same time. Generally speaking, realism is understood as a slogan or attitude to achieve a “correct or true representation of the world.” But such an epistemological demand must be delivered (or materialized) before us through some formal or technical artifices because otherwise it “ceases to be an aesthetic mode of representation and falls out of art altogether.” Jameson’s account, however, is particularly instructive in that it helps us reconsider the troubled relationship between realism and modernism in twentieth-century art in general, and in film history in particular. On its most basic level, Jameson defines realism as a method or discourse that aims for the integration of epistemology in the realm of art and aesthetics. But he then suggests
that we read this definition as also indicating the core mentality of modernism, strategically foregrounding the compatibility between the two. As a result of this practice, realism reemerges before us as “a form of demiurgic praxis” that restores “some active and even playful/experimental impulse to the inertia of its appearance as a copy or representation of things,” and modernism, in turn, is relegated to “a passive-receptive activity, a discovery procedure like science, a process of attention no less demanding and disciplined than submission to free association.”

Jameson’s intention here is not to deny the validity of realism and modernism as such. Rather, he deliberately shifts our attention from what to when these two art movements were. That both realism and modernism share a similar epistemological instinct—one is directed to grasp what we call reality in general, and the other to reveal the reality of the institution and making of art itself—attests their throwness (Geworfenheit) into the world of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity. In this particular historical situation, the preexisting discursive condition of knowledge acquisition—or the “grid of intelligibility,” to use Chow’s term again—became totally destabilized and reimagined through numerous scientific discoveries and technological inventions. Having emerged as one such modern epistemological medium, film was able, or even destined, to enrich aesthetic possibilities of realism and modernism in the past century. Jameson argues, however, that film history has two peculiar sets of transitions—from realism to modernism and from modernism to postmodernism, divided into the silent and sound eras. This statement itself requires a more rigorous historical verification, but it at least gives us some clues to think about the repetitive alternation of realism and modernism before and after World War II. Moreover, his reference to the paradoxical appearance of postmodernism before postwar realism seems relevant to the history of Japanese cinema, where not a few critics and filmmakers participated in or took inspiration from the notorious wartime debate known as “overcoming modernity” (kindai no chōkoku).

The dialectic between form (essence, idealism) and matter (existence, materialism), the integration of epistemology into aesthetics, and the flexible or even amorphous relationship with modernism—these are the main features of realism I adopt and explore in my inquiry into the history of Japanese film theory. Then, one may ask, what does the specific locale of Japan and its local discourse contribute to our discussion of the paradox of realism?

REALISM WITHIN JAPANESE MODERNIZATION

First of all, we should take into account the accelerated process of modernization that frequently took place in the non-West. Marked by their belated or forced entries into the hegemony of Western modernity with the uneven distribution of cultural capital, people in non-Western countries confronted the increasing influx
of foreign terms and concepts at an unprecedented pace and in overwhelming amounts. This was also the case in Japan, which officially declared its transition from a feudal society to a modern state only after the Meiji Restoration (1868). As a result, realism, or any other isms and schools of art that had emerged in Europe during the long nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, came to Japan less as a new visual or literary style to be added to the preexisting aesthetic norms than as a discourse for modernizing local practices of literature, painting, theater, and film. For instance, the premise of objective depiction brought to Japan at the turn of the twentieth century through the introduction of literary naturalism played a significant role in launching a criticism against the Kabuki-influenced, very formulaic acting style and narrative presentation dominant in 1910s Japanese cinema. Nevertheless, the dominance of naturalism in local film discourse became outdated by the early 1920s (though it made a comeback after the introduction of sound), as its main concern had already been shifted to adopt newer (or more modernized) trends in filmmaking such as German expressionism and French impressionism.

What I want to emphasize here, however, is the persistence of realism in Japanese local discourse even after the introduction of the art and cultural movements we usually associate with 1920s modernism. In the eyes of Japanese critics and practitioners at the time, the distinction between realism and modernism was not as obvious or decisive as we might think, because both seemed to pursue the same task of developing a better method to integrate the epistemological into the aesthetic, to better capture and grasp what they deemed to be true and authentic, in their multiple forms of expression. In his 1925 manifesto for the literary modernist group called New Sensation School (Shinkankakuha), the writer Yokomitsu Riichi declared that the group recognizes “futurism, cubism, expressionism, dada, symbolism, constructivism, and some of the realists” (emphasis added) as its constitutive elements.55 Furthermore, the art historian Itagaki Takao and the literary critic Kurahara Korehito had a fierce debate over how to develop a new theory of realism around the turn of the 1930s, appropriating either the machine aesthetic or the proletarian art movement as the basis for their argumentation.

One could better understand this situation by looking at Roman Jakobson’s 1921 essay “On Realism in Art” and what he called “the extreme relativity of the concept of ‘realism’.“56 According to Jakobson, “Classicists, sentimentalists, the romanticist to a certain extent, even the ‘realists’ of the nineteenth century, the modernists to a large degree, and finally futurists, expressionists, and their like, have more than once steadfastly proclaimed faithfulness to reality, maximum verisimilitude—in other words, realism—as the guiding motto of their artistic program.”57 With this overview Jakobson asserts that the idea of realism persists, but its contents and modes of expression vary over time. He also argues that isms or schools of art added to this list of realisms always yield an unusual or inauthentic impression at
first glance, since “the artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perception” by rewriting “the rules of composition canonized by his predecessors.” Although this essay was not translated into Japanese until 1971, a similar view of realism was commonly shared among Japanese intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century.

The wide acceptance of the persistence of realism as a hallmark of modern art inevitably led to the maturation of Japanese local discourse on cinematic realism. In June 1936, the film magazine *Eiga hyōron* published a special issue entitled “Film and Realism” ("Eiga to riarizumu") featuring fourteen essays by the country’s leading film critics. The result was somewhat chaotic: some argued that cinematic realism should always be premised on the camera’s capacity to reproduce the impression of reality; others prioritized the film director’s active intervention in addressing social problems; and still others attended to the viewer’s lived experience of the world on and through screen. But equally important as these diverse approaches was the self-reflexive nature of their arguments. Tsuji Hisakazu, one of the contributors to the special issue, aptly summarized this point:

Artists today no longer possess the same fortune that had allowed nineteenth-century writers to detect and depict reality under the name of *shajitsu shugi* [mimetic realism or more literally, “photocopying-the-truth-ism”] without casting doubts on their methods. The term “realism” becomes dependent on each individual’s interpretation, and its contested meanings remain valid only among those sharing the same interpretation. . . . The singular principle of realism has disappeared. The twentieth century seemed to begin from here. Realism is not the problem restricted to either novel or theater. It is the problem that matters in all forms of art that intend to depict human truths. Newly born in the twentieth century, film art finally came to confront this problem in a serious manner.59

There was no exaggeration in Tsuji’s self-observation. Readers will soon discover that the historical narrative I delineate throughout this book is loaded with countless disputes, disagreements, and miscommunications among a relatively small cohort of Japanese critics and filmmakers. But this does not attest to their failure to establish innovative theoretical accounts of cinematic realism. On the contrary, Japanese film criticism was remarkable for its persistent treatment of realism as the manifestation of a paradigm shift, always alert to cinema’s aesthetic and technological potential to alter the very condition for our perception and understanding of the world. For this reason, I do not use the phrase *cinematic realism* as a signifier of certain film techniques or narrative patterns already registered as “realist” in general film history; I use it instead to encompass a larger (and undoubtedly transnational) discursive project that aims to articulate the lived experience of twentieth-century modernity with the aid of the film medium and its particular form of mediation. This last point necessitates a further clarification