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The Saga of Anatahan and Japan

It is not widely known that, outside of some small critical and scholarly circles, Josef von Sternberg’s last film The Saga of Anatahan was made in Japan. Sternberg stayed in Japan for eleven months from August 1952 to July 1953 and worked on the film with a production team that was entirely comprised of Japanese crew and cast. The film was based on well-known news reports about one Japanese woman and more than thirty Japanese men stranded on the Pacific island of Anatahan during the Second World War. The news and memoirs of the survivors reported a tragic story about the group of civilians and soldiers who were hiding in the tropical island for nearly seven years, refusing to believe Japan’s defeat, until their voluntary surrender to a US Navy rescue team in 1951. Soon after granting a warm and sympathetic welcome to the survivors, however, the Japanese media began carrying some sensational accounts of the story titled “the Anatahan incident”: at least two men died in a fight over one Japanese woman and several others who had an affair with her disappeared or died of uncertain and mysterious accidents. Sternberg learned of this incident in New York and approached Japanese film producer Kawakita Nagamasa to make a fiction film in Japan, which led him to begin the production the following year. Having two translators at his side, Sternberg struggled but enjoyed taking a great deal of control over every aspect of the co-production – writing, directing, editing, and even narrating the film – for the first time since his glorious days in Paramount in the 1930s.

Sternberg wrote in his autobiography that Anatahan was “my best film – and my most unsuccessful one” and it still remained “anonymous” in the early 1960s. In fact the film, along with the real incident, went into obscurity shortly after its commercial and critical failure in Japan and America. At the time of the initial release, when the Japanese saw the long awaited feature with Japanese dialogue and subtitled English narration by Sternberg himself in 1953, many critics were indifferent to the film or shocked by it – particularly by the distant and dry narration in English. With a great sense of authority, the figureless voice comments on the images depicting murderously lustful desires of the men directed towards a young and beautiful woman, the long and haunting communal life of the nearly naked Japanese drifters on the tropical island, their desires for power and survival, various religious and patriotic rituals, constant fear of both in-group murder and the Allied enemy, and a strong nostalgia for home. After the lukewarm reception of the Japanese premiere and first-run release, Sternberg departed from Japan with the negative print of the film, hoping for a successful US release. The originally released film was, however, shown as a limited engagement in America in 1954, which had, oddly enough, no English subtitles of the Japanese dialogue. As I
elaborate later, the curious fate of this “anonymous film” did not end here. On the one hand, in Japan Kawakita replaced the problematic narration with a young English-speaking Japanese man in order to market the film in Europe. On the other hand, in America Sternberg later re-edited the film with newly shot footage, hoping for a more successful re-release in the US. Although Anatahan went further into obscurity particularly after Sternberg’s death in 1969, as a result of the multiple versions of the film that emerged, it actually opened up questions of authorship, authenticity, and originality.

This article traces the history of the long-forgotten _The Saga of Anatahan_ by examining the film text, reception of the film, and its authorship in a new light. During a few years before and after Sternberg’s death, some critical and historical studies on this film in Europe and America revealed some intriguing aspects of production history and thus _provided analytical insight to further decipher what is hidden beneath the apparent plasticity and complexity of the film_. These critical essays, however, barely touched upon the rich production materials in the Japanese language and reception of the film in Japan, which resulted in illuminating the film within the framework of classical author studies that granted the authorship almost singularly to Sternberg, the director of the film. Sternberg’s remarkable career and art were illuminated, but the site of consumption—work of Japanese collaborators, the responses of audiences, and the historical context—was _untouched in the discourses_. In other words, the dynamically collaborative film production, the complex workings of international co-production, the _intriguing commoditization_ process of art cinema, and the in-depth analysis on the historical context and the reception of films in Japan have been largely neglected in these _studies_.

While following these predecessors’ wake-up call to reevaluate the aesthetically and historically unsettling film as _well as Sternberg’s art and professionalism, this essay relocates Anatahan within a transnational context_. I examine the collective aspect of the film’s authorship in order to shed light on Sternberg’s collaboration process with Japanese filmmakers and actors as well as the roles played by uncredited film producers, critics, the general audience, and the distributor who differently interpreted, or showed indifference to, the film in Japan. I consult the primary documents in Japanese language that _have been currently available for scholarly research_. I look into these documents in order to _demonstrate how the different ways the Japanese regarded Sternberg and his work in Japan within the context of postwar history in general and film history in particular opened up multiple readings of the film_. Ultimately, this essay argues that _the examination of the dynamic site of consumption dialectically relocates consumers on the site of cultural production as producers of meanings of a film text_.

**Pre-History: Kawakita Nagamasa and Osawa Yoshio**

Sternberg, Kawakita and Osawa Yoshio were co-executives of Daiwa Production, an independent production company founded in 1952 and operated only until mid-1953, _for Anatahan’s production_. However, the film’s opening credit sequence does not list the names of Kawakita or Osawa. This section illuminates _how the two producers behind the official credit list—Kawakita, in particular—came on board to produce Anatahan_. The production history of Anatahan cannot be fully understood without examining the careers of these two businessmen, and _their involvements in the international film distribution and co-production projects in the prewar and post-war period_.

In his autobiographical essay written in 1980, Kawakita recalls the shock that he experienced in the mid-1920s _when watching the distorted Japanese culture and customs represented on the operatic stage production of Madame Butterfly in Germany_.

It was intolerable for me; however, I realized that this was perhaps the image of Japan of which Western people conceived and that the level of understanding of Japan was still so low. … I felt compelled to find a way to inform the people in the West of our humanity, morals, customs, and culture as soon as possible. At the same time I thought about a way to inform the Japanese on many practical things in the culture of everyday life in the West, from which the Japanese should learn so much. I kept on contemplating many different
ways, and finally came to the conclusion that cinema was the most appropriate medium to accomplish this task.\(^5\)

This passage clarifies that Kawakita's motivation to initiate the foreign-film trading business came from the “unbearable” representation of Japanese culture in the West based on the ignorance originating from the lack of global cultural circulation. The mutual understanding of “humanity, morals, customs, and culture” through film exchanges between the East and West remained the base of the cultural mission in his film distribution and production business. Kawakita first engaged in the film trading business as a representative of UFA. In 1928, at the age of 25, he then established Towa, an independent foreign film distribution company that predominately imported highly acclaimed European films. While traveling in Europe to purchase distribution rights to films, Kawakita occasionally attempted to introduce Japanese films to the European film markets. He succeeded in bringing remarkable films such as Mäden in Uniform (1931) and Le Paquebot Tenacity (S.S. Tenacity, 1934) in Japan, but he could not bring Japanese films to the world market. According to Kawakita Kashiō, the wife and business collaborator of Nagamasa, an omnibus film titled Nippon, for instance, was made out of three films that Kawakita sent to Berlin in 1929, but Kawakita was advised by the distributor not to bring any more Japanese films because “the German audience laughed at the scenes that were not made to be laughed at.” The laughter was directed at the every day gestures and customs of Japan. Kawakita nearly gave up on distributing existing Japanese films. But he started to think about producing Japanese films that portray Japanese culture more “accurately” to promote better understanding, to export to the European countries.

It is important to understand that Towa's business was built upon the emerging art cinema boom and the taste culture in Japan. Towa gradually gained a stable distribution and exhibition circuit and market in Japan and prepared for large-scale film production. Towa's selections of imported films grew each year, as did the number of Japanese critics and foreign film fans. Thus, Kawakita gained great respect from critics and fans as a virtuous cosmopolitan entrepreneur who maintained a balance between a culturally motivated mission and a market-driven policy. Towa cultivated and benefited from the unexplored urban art cinema market in Japan with its highly acclaimed European films, while building a strong network with critical circles to incorporate their advice and opinions. However, as the Japanese film industry was forming its oligarchic structure in the early 1930s, Kawakita struggled, but maintained Towa's independence when Shochiku predominantly imported marketable American films and occasionally intervened in the European film trading that Towa depended on. Toho, a distribution and exhibition company before its establishment of the vertically integrated Toho Block in 1937, also intervened Towa's business by distributing European films in 1935. The difference between Shochiku or Toho and Towa was that the former had their nation-wide exhibition chains. Therefore, Kawakita tactically built congenial business partnerships with the majors to distribute films through their theater chains, while establishing various connections with some independent studios or theaters, in order to ensure Towa's independence and financial success throughout the 1930s.

A vertically-integrated film company Toho Eiga Co. (as known as Toho and the Toho Block) was established in 1937 through the acquisitions of talkie production company PCL and Kyoto-based JO studio owned by a young entrepreneur Osawa Yoshio. In the previous year, Kawakita approached Osawa, a Princeton-educated president of JO and Osawa Trading Company, to work on co-producing a film by inviting a German filmmaker and his crew. Upon Osawa's agreement, Towa and JO began co-financing the controversial Germany-Japan co-production film, The New Earth (1937).\(^7\) Osawa's membership of the executive board of Toho was promising the national exhibition outlet for this project. Kawakita traveled to Germany and decided to have Arnold Fanck for the producer and the director of the high-profile film project. The New Earth was Kawakita's first production project and the first international co-production project between Japan and the Nazi Germany. When he started preparing the project in 1935, the film was to reflect Kawakita's philanthropic ideal of advancing mutual cultural understanding between Europe, America and Asia through cinema and his strong emotional attachment to Germany and
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China, where he had lived and received education. However, the political climate surrounding him and these three countries had radically changed in the rise of Japanese militarism and Nazi expansion by the time of production in 1936. Germany and Japan became signatories to the Anti-Comintern Pact that year. Imperial Japan, which had established Manchukuo in Northern China in 1932 after the sudden invasion, was encouraging migration of Japanese people to Manchuria while advancing its colonial projects towards the South on the Asian continent.

Although The New Earth was a German-Japanese propaganda film shot entirely in Japan,8 it was not the Imperial government but Kawakita who invested his company money into the high-profile and large-budget film. Osawa Yoshio also joined as an investor for The New Earth.9 In conceiving the story of The New Earth, Kawakita was fully aware of the cultural agenda of the Japanese Empire. He endorsed the script developed by German director and producer Arnold Fanck.10 The story faithfully reflected Nazi cultural policy and Japanese colonial and paternal desire projected onto Asia. A young Japanese man who studied in Germany returns with his German lover to his home country where his family and his fiancée await. The man realizes that his real task as a citizen of the Empire is to work for his beloved nation and land cultivation in the rural areas. Ultimately, his German girlfriend realizes his national ties and duties and willingly returns to her own country. He then marries his Japanese fiancée, and the new couple migrates to the Japanese Empire’s uncultivated new land: Manchuria.

The New Earth was a big commercial success in Japan and Germany.11 Mountain–film director Fanck naturally put a visual emphasis on mountainous landscape, and conveniently avoided the issue of interracial marriage in order to focus on the Japanese hero’s realization of his nationalistic obligations. The patience and strong will of traditional Japanese virtues acted and embodied by the hero as well as by his fiancée, a daughter of the former Samurai family (played by Hara Setsuko), were presented to the German audience. As Michael Baskett notes, the ubiquitous Japanese cultural iconographies in this film were “claustrophobically decorated with Nazi and Japanese flags, cherry blossom branches, and Japanese lanterns.” Thus the film was made for the German audience to understand Japanese customs and virtues that was, however, filtered through the eyes of a German director who had never visited Japan before the film production.12

I do not wish to reiterate the history and analysis of this much-discussed and commercially successful film, since many historians have documented them in detail. Nonetheless, it is worth elaborating on how the film was promoted and received by three different national audiences. When the film was released in Japan in 1937, Japanese film critics appreciated the powerful landscape and mise-en-scène and credited Fanck for the cinematic beauty. However, critics did not miss the blatant exoticism projected on Japan, such as the overt emphasis on rather disappearing Japanese customs. According to the book Document Showa, the reception of the film in Germany was heavily controlled by The Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. Joseph Goebbels, the head of the ministry, ordered the press to treat the film as an important cultural treasure, to appreciate the film, and to report on the premiere screenings (which Kawakita and Hara attended).13 Meanwhile, Kawakita attempted to show the film in France and China. The French audience saw the film but strongly rejected its overtly propagandistic messages. The film was shown in China, but it aroused rather strong anti-Japanese sentiments.14 Kawakita was saddened by the Chinese reaction, while being satisfied with the film’s reception in Japan and Germany. He continued to pursue his task and dream to cultivate mutual understanding between Imperial Japan and China through his next project, The Road to Peace to the Orient (1938), in Shanghai.

Meetings with Sternberg

In August 1936, Sternberg took his private trip in Japan at the turning point in his career in Hollywood, a year after he left Paramount. His trip in Asia was in search of inspiration, new subjects, and, more than anything else, the ideal environments in which he could exercise a great control over every aspect of film production. In Japan, Sternberg, a confirmed Japanophile, witnessed the beauty of Japanese tradition and culture with his own eyes. He was also enchanted by a meeting with his enthusiastic Japanese audiences including many filmmakers and
Returning to his former job at the Osawa Co. and the Yosio to work with him on this project. Osawa had months. The Anatahan incident after exchanging letters for 1952 and agreed to finance the project based on the idea to make a film in Japan. Needless to say, this idea would become nearly impossible to realize in the following year when the Sino-Japanese War broke out. When Japan did not accept America’s last warning to withdraw the Imperial army from China in 1941, which led to the Pacific War, the collaboration became further impossible. Sternberg had to wait for the materialization of the co-production project until after the war and U.S. occupation.

It was only in 1951 when Sternberg began corresponding with Kawakita again on the co-production project, after Kataki was able to resume activity in film production and distribution. Arguably, Kawakita’s film productions during the war show an empathy towards his Chinese collaborators and Chinese audiences, but Kawakita’s involvement with the film industry under Japanese Empire, particularly with the distributions and productions of Imperial propaganda films in China as a chief representative of China Movie Company (Zhonghua Dienying Gongsi/Chuka Deni) in Shanghai from 1938 to 1945, had resulted in his five-year expulsion from the Japanese film industry from 1947 to 1950 as a Class B war criminal, according to the 1947 law of the purge of public officials initiated by the SCAP (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers). Once de-purged and returned to Towa, Kawakita immediately reinforced his global network that he had built in the prewar era and presciently explored the new art cinema markets of international film festivals, looking for a chance to resume the international co-production projects as well as global film and cultural exchanges. Kawakita met Sternberg in New York in 1952 and agreed to finance the project based on the Anatahan incident after exchanging letters for months. Upon his return, Kawakita asked Osawa Yoshio to work with him on this project. Osawa had been back to his former job at the Osawa Co. and the executive board of Toho after the SCAP’s de-purge. During the war, Osawa engaged in the Imperial Japan’s totalized propaganda film productions as a president of Toho and, as a result, became classified as a Class B war criminal during the purge. It is not difficult to imagine that Kawakita and Osawa were excited to work in full force in the first post-Occupation year on the high-profile independent co-production after the three-year-long exile. The drastic change was occurring regarding the place of Japanese films in the international film market at the time when the two re-entered the film industry, as Rashomon’s achievements of Golden Lion in Venice and Academy Award for the Best Foreign Film in 1951 paved a way for more Japanese cinema to be exported. Furthermore, the end of Occupation enervated the SCAP’s censorship that had legally imposed various restrictions on the depiction of war and patriotism, which allowed more freedom for filmmaker to represent the recent history of Japan from the point of view of the Japanese. On this changing socio-cultural ground, Kawakita and Osawa established Daiwa Production solely for the Anataban project in Japan and sought investors and collaborators for the large-budget film.

The currently available sources and memoirs on this early stage of the Anataban pre-production suggest that these two uncredited producers built the threshold and foundation of the production. A major company Toho was to play an important role in producing Anataban, for which Osawa and Kawakita were on the executive board. Daiwa hired Takimura Kazuo, who had produced a famous Enoken series for Toho, as a producer to be credited. Takimura brought major members of the crew from his network in and outside of Toho. Tsuburaya Eiji, soon became best-known for Toho’s Godzilla series starting in 1954, was chosen as a special effect director. Osawa had invested in Tsuburaya’s various film technologies and machines through his trading company since the 1930s, including a number of screen processing experiments. The Daiwa executives’ reputation, their connection with Toho, and Sternberg’s fame in the pre-war era attracted many investors and the press to the Anataban project in a short time.

Sternberg arrived in Japan with his family on August 5, 1952, and immediately began the pre-production in Tokyo. One of the unexpected troubles came up at the very starting point. Daiwa
planned to use one of the Toho studio lots for its production; however, according to Kawakita Kashiko, Toho abruptly refused to lend its studio lot, which was the unexpected setback for Sternberg and the Daiwa Production executives. Osawa used a local connection in his hometown Kyoto and managed to rent Okazaki Industrial Pavilion owned by the city of Kyoto. This huge multi-purpose space had a high glass ceiling that was perfect for getting sunlight and building multiple sets. Sternberg and the Daiwa executives rushed to finish the pre-production before the planned shooting set for December 1952. Sternberg, however, refused to take a short cut and went through a long and painstaking process to construct his ideal working conditions, which required enormous effort to overcome language and cultural barriers and a great deal of assistance and understanding from Japanese collaborators.

The Production of The Saga of Anatahan

From the mid-August through November in 1952, while writing the script, Sternberg researched updated journalistic accounts of the Anatahan incident, had many texts translated. He finally chose the memoir written by a survivor Maruyama Michiro as the base of his screenplay of Anatahan. He then studied various Japanese customs, ukiyo-e, and the tropical flora of Mariana Islands to conceive the various scene settings with assistance of translators and respective specialists. He wrote the synopsis in English and then worked with a translator and a young Japanese screenwriter Asano Tatsuo to develop the colloquial Japanese dialogue. In this adaptation process, the story came to focus on thirteen men and one woman named Higa Kaoru and followed their lives on the island starting from June 1944 until the moment of the seven male survivors’ return (the media differently reported the number of the men who lived at the time of 1944 from thirty-two or thirty-one, which ended in twenty on their return).

Sternberg and his crew also created amazingly detailed flow charts and storyboards to visualize the dramatic progress in the narrative. In the flow chart titled “Anatahan Chart,” different colors specify different feelings (jealousy, nostalgia, etc.) and actions (violence, surrender, etc.) of each character in each sequence. The intensity of each color specifies the intensity of emotion or action, and lines are drawn to clarify how these emotions or actions of characters interact. The storyboard drawings by Fukuda Toyoshiro illustrate visual cues from the framing to small gestures for every single planned shot. Each image is accompanied with Japanese translation of Sternberg’s instructions and explanation of action, not emotion. Instead of using verbal languages to make the cast understand his idea, Sternberg chose to largely depend on the visual aids to articulate how meanings of actions in each sequence constitutes a psychological and dramatic flow, in order to minimize miscommunications through language.

Sternberg insisted on choosing crew members, in some cases, out of the recommendations offered by the Daiwa executives and Takimura. The outcome of the search surprised the media and the Japanese film industry, as the lineup was mostly comprised of the young and the anonymous. Many important filmmakers in Japanese film history, however, grew out of this film production, learning a great deal of knowledge, collaboration, various skills and professionalism by carefully observing Sternberg’s work. To take one example, Okazaki Kozo, cinematographer of Anatahan, was one of them, who joined the crew in the pre-production stage as a still photographer. According to some media reports and the vivid memoir of Okazaki, Sternberg gave him torturous assignments to test his skills and enthusiasm, which continued for months. Okazaki worked hard to meet the director’s expectation, but at the same time felt frustration towards Sternberg’s unexpectedly demanding requests and difficult attitudes. Therefore, when Okazaki was informed of the decision made by “finicky guy” who promoted him to the cinematographer just before the production began, the selection surprised all, even Okazaki himself, a hard-working yet 33-year-old freelancing cameraman who had mainly worked as a director of photography in a second unit before. Okazaki presumed, however, that the work required him to play a role as a camera assistant and to follow Sternberg’s technical and aesthetic instructions. Upon receiving precise instructions on film stock or exposures of camera and printing process, Okazaki gradually learned that Sternberg’s vision rested on his great knowledge of cinematography and camera techniques. Okazaki also found that Sternberg’s “tyrannical attitudes” were more or less performance to get the best out of his crew on the set. Okazaki wrote...
Press sheet of The Sage of Anatahan (1953; produced by Daiwa Production and distributed by Towa Eiga).
that, after establishing his career and reputation as one of the most respected cinematographer in Japan, he continued to regard the experience of collaborating with Sternberg as one of the greatest influences on his career as a cinematographer.

Sternberg’s choice of actors and actresses appeared unusual in similar vein: many were less experienced in film acting. According to the crew’s testimonies, it was largely because Sternberg chose the cast based on his first impression by seeing their physical appearance disregarding their acting skills. Sternberg went through a long search to see the candidates on their jobs at theaters, cabarets, or geisha houses, to meet his ideal body for “the only woman of the earth” and “a Queen Bee,” although Daiwa’s original plan was to cast a popular star such as Yamaguchi Yoshiko or Kogure Michiyō. Sternberg chose an eighteen-year-old revue dancer Negishi Akemi from the Nichigeki Dancing Team (whose parent company was Toho as well), who had never acted in film. For another instance, Sternberg found Amikura Shiro, an executive of Toho’s talent agency who had also no experience of acting, in a restaurant, and cast him in the role of the patriotic sergeant. Some others were lesser known kabuki players, dancers, and very few actors who had very little experience in acting for a film.

The production began in December 1952 and ended in February 1953 at the Okazaki Industrial Pavilion in Kyoto. The shooting was almost entirely conducted in the studio. Special effects director Tsuburaya projected the scenery of the tropical wood and sky on the screen behind the exterior sets in which real tropical trees were transplanted to create luxuriant tropical foliage. Once constructed, multiple sets remained for shooting and re-shooting, which was nearly impossible in small Japanese film studios. Accompanied by one or two translators, assistant director Shu Taguchi and a professor from a local university in Kyoto, the production team followed the Anatahan Chart, the storyboards, and two types of scripts based on the screenplay collaboratively written by Sternberg and Asano Tatsuo. In Script A, settings and actions were described on the left column, and the dialogues were written on the right. Script B, though practical, was also an unusual script: One page shows more detailed notes on visible components (“Actually Present”), extra-diegetic audible components (“Narration”), and ambiguously invisible contextual and conceptual notes (“Incidents,” “Experience of Characters,” and “Tempo”), but there is no boxed space titled emotion or feeling. The “Tempo” section suggests intriguingly that the film is a symphonic music created by many different players through an orchestration of one conductor.

Despite having extensive preparation tools, according to the crew Sternberg never hesitated to alter a large portion of the scenes during the production when necessary. The ending was completely altered as a result of the changes made on the set. The ending of the earlier version of the screenplay begins with the returned survivors meeting with their families and saying good-bye to each other at the airport in Tokyo. Just before leaving the airport, one of the survivors, Takahashi, finds the mud of Anatahan on his new shoes and approaches one of the shoe shine women sitting on the floor at the airport. Takahashi then follows his family and leaves the airport, after all the other survivors have departed. The script reads, “[T]he audience is taken along a line of shoe shine women who look at TAKAHASHI. The last woman raises her head to look at TAKAHASHI. It is KEIKO – a changed KEIKO – a KEIKO punished by circumstance and ignorance – but nevertheless KEIKO.” In this version, Keiko is fixed at the site of the airport, which signifies that her place is outside of the Japanese society, as if she is being “punished.” In the final version of the film released in 1953 in Japan, however, “the punishment” of Keiko remains only ambiguously as psychological torment in the climactic ending scene. After the seven shots of the seven smiling survivors arriving at the airport, Keiko enters into the frame, beautifully dressed in kimono, accompanied with a voiceover, “[W]e are home at last – and if I know anything at all about KEIKO, she too, must have been here.” In the following shot, one of the dead men walks towards the screen with a hauntingly grave facial expression, intercut with the close up of the beautifully illuminated Keiko’s contemplating face in the dark. The similar intercuts are repeated four more times as if Keiko recalls all the dead men one by one. During this sequence, the viewer hears the distant sound of merry Okinawan folk songs that the men often sang on the island overlapping some arguing voices. When the sound gradually disappears, a dramatic
score composed by Ifukube Akira enters. Throughout the film up to this moment, all cinematic devices such as narration, acting, lighting, and camera place the audience in the position of a distant observer. However, this ending with Keiko’s remembrance finally invites the audience to witness how Keiko suffers from the traumatic memory of the war.

In sum, many extant testimonies and production materials suggest that Sternberg and his Japanese crew undertook various efforts to understand each other and make the film that the director firmly envisioned. The charts, drawings, and scripts that I have introduced above show how communication on the set was heavily mediated by translated words and visual cues. This collaboration reinforced Sternberg’s emphasis on bodies, movements and interactions rather than on deliberate acting and psychological drama. These constantly mediated processes and the emphasis on bodies and actions resulted in imprinting the apparent impenetrability or plasticity on the film text. In addition, Sternberg’s disembodied narration—added in the post-production process with Japanese subtitles—explains the action, events, Japanese culture and rituals, and reinforces the distance between the spectator and characters. Sternberg added a descriptive text to the film’s opening credit sequence, “A Postscript to the Pacific Conflict,” but the layered and mediated cinematic commentary on the “Pacific conflict” bewildered the Japanese audience who saw it in the theaters from June to July in 1953.

Critical Reception

Before and during Sternberg’s stay in Japan, there was massive coverage of the real Anatahan incident. When the media reported the return of the survivors and treated them as a group of unfortunate war heroes, the public seemed to be sympathetic to the story. Towards the end of 1951 the media, however, began reporting the highly dramatized tales about the mysterious deaths of five men and their love affair with Higa Kazuko.32 Daiwa executives were aware of such unfavorable public reactions towards the Anatahan incident, which led them to question why Sternberg chose the particular story to be made into a film. Upon his arrival in August 1952, Sternberg told the journalists that he was not interested in the real Anatahan incident. He proudly announced that his version of the Anatahan story is somewhat independent from the real incident and promised that the film would meet the expectations of the Japanese audience whom he had loved since his first visit to Japan in 1936.

The producers seemingly welcomed the interviews with Sternberg by respected critics, renowned scholars and filmmakers, since it could be a good opportunity to disseminate the counter-argument raised by the yellow journalism. In conversation with a group of scholars and journalists, one commentator mentioned that the film about Anatahan might invoke “unpleasant feeling”
about the war among the Japanese. Sternberg replied that he believed that “Japanese people are very strong people” who could admit and overcome mistakes in the present or the past.\footnote{35} In response to the question about why the Anatahan incident attracted him so much, Sternberg replied:

The reason why I decided to make a film adaptation of the Anatahan incident was not because the incident is pertinent to Japanese nor because it happened to non-American people. How do human beings behave in the most unfortunate situation? This point is what I am most interested in. It doesn’t matter what kind of racial background these people have. This great story is almost as great as Robinson Crusoe Story…. I am a humanist, and I love Japan. I will never make a film to displease the Japanese people.\footnote{34}

Thus, Sternberg asked the Japanese to understand that his film of the Anatahan incident was going to be inherently about the Japanese, but more about the universal allegory of isolated human beings. At the same time, he encouraged the Japanese audiences to be strong, objective and rational to examine the human behaviors and experience during wartime.

In response, Nakano Yoshio, a scholar at the University of Tokyo, rejected Sternberg’s call to rational or objective thinking and instead evoked uncontrollably traumatic physiological response to any mnemonic traces that would evoke the unwanted memory of the past. The mnemonic traces in this context are both the film and any stories about the Anatahan incident, which might bring back the wartime memory from which many of the Japanese were still vividly suffering. According to Nakano, the major difference between the Robinson Crusoe story and that of the people on the Anatahan island is that the latter left Japan by force of the Imperial regime and ended up experiencing the war and the isolation on the island, while the former leaves his own country voluntarily to seek a great adventure. Nakano elaborated on this point by highlighting Japan’s nationally specific memory of the war: at the parable from an objective and rational viewpoint. Perhaps, I cannot even completely penetrate how much they are suffering from the burden that war imposed on their psychology, because I knew that I was never going to be conscripted. It might be difficult to ask foreigners who had never experienced a totalitarian regime like the Japanese did, to understand such pain.\footnote{35}

Admitting that Sternberg’s comments had a logic in terms of encouraging the Japanese to move forward, Nakano supported Sternberg to make the film but asked not to forget about the fact that there were still many traumatized people who emotionally reacted to the war.

Meanwhile, what accelerated public disgust toward the incident was Higa’s ubiquitous public appearance. Higa was settling in her hometown in Okinawa under the US Occupation, but frequently traveled to the mainland to appear in magazine interviews and entertainment shows, driven by a strong urge to defend herself from false accusations made by the media. She toured the country with a theater troupe and acted in a stage play called *The Queen Bee of Anatahan*. She also reenacted her own life in Anatahan in an independently-produced low-budget documentary-drama film entitled *This is the Truth of Anatahan!* that was released in April 1953, two months before the release of Sternberg’s *Anatahan*.\footnote{36}

The public, intellectuals in particular, maintained indifference or critical views toward her. As a result, by the time *Anatahan* played in theaters, the public was tired of hearing about the Anatahan incident no matter how much they claimed their authenticity.

*The Saga of Anatahan* was distributed by Towa and premiered in June 1953 in two first-run-theaters in Kyoto and in Tokyo. The official exhibition began on June 28 at Theatre Ginza, Tokyo. The film then traveled to other major cities and then to smaller cities in Japan. Kawakita’s Towa, which distributed the film in the domestic and international market, advertised the film in Japan through major and local newspapers by posting many ads shortly before the release in June. The film, however, failed to attract the audiences in Japan; as Sternberg noted, it was a unanimous critical failure. The critical opinions towards the film and Sternberg were often redirected towards the Japanese producers. In a roundtable discussion published in
Kinema Junpo, the journalists lambasted the film by severely critiquing Sternberg's direction, his exotic view, the cast's amateurish acting, and his idea of making a film out of the story in the first place. They criticized Kawakita and Osaka for granting Sternberg complete control over an expensive film production that only objectified the Japanese on screen.

Some Japanese intellectuals continued to rail against the real incident and Higa Kazuko. Curiously, some Japanese critics disgusted about the incident expressed their views as representative of national opinion. Kitagawa Fuyuhiko, a famous critic and novelist, criticized Sternberg’s sympathy towards Keiko and the men on the island in the film. He pointed out the sympathy elicited for the survivors in the final scene of their return to Japan, which I elaborated in the previous section. Kitagawa questioned: “What does the scene tell us about Sternberg's idea about Japan?” and continued: “Is he criticizing cynically that those men who did such ridiculous things are being welcomed as heroes in Japan? Or is he seriously celebrating the good luck of these men in the scene as a mere fact of being faithful to the reality?” In Kitagawa's view, the returning men deserve punishment for their actions so that the scene must depict their grief and regret in order to make a moral statement criticizing their “ridiculous behaviors on the island.” Kitagawa also detested the final sequence of Keiko's recollection, since “it is unnecessary to depict that woman so normal.” He insisted that “Sternberg should not depict Japan if he really wants to show his affection for this country.” Thus, while insisting in his essay on how much the Japanese public as a whole detested the incident as a national shame, Kitagawa spoke as a national representative and suggested that Sternberg did not understand Japanese postwar sentiments.

The film's theater pamphlet carried a message by Sternberg to the Japanese audience. The comment emphasized that Sternberg wanted to transform the real Anatahan story into an abstract tale about human isolation that would be identifiable to any viewer in the world. He also noted that he wished the film to solicit deeper understanding of the beauty of Japanese culture from the world audience. Sternberg left Japan soon after the release of the film. Many journalists criticized the film, and some even ridiculed it and Sternberg's direction. Sternberg's sincere desire to fill in the gap of cultural knowledge between Japan and other countries – as amply demonstrated in both his voiceover narration and his writings – strikingly resembles the language and the idea expressed in the autobiographical memoir of Kawakita.

Although the media often discussed the film as a Japan–America co-production (gassaku), Kawakita in fact circulated the film not through a distribution route of Japanese films. Instead he distributed Anatahan as a “foreign film made in Japan,” through Shochiku’s theater chain specializing in foreign films. However, Kawakita brought the film to the Venice Film Festival in August 1953 as an invitation piece from Japan; in this context, he presented Anatahan as a “Japanese film” to the European market. The film's nationality was conveniently altered and made flexible in order to be seen and promoted in the global film market. Media coverage of Anatahan was, however, in the shadow of detailed reports about Mizoguchi Kenji’s Ugetsu at the Venice Film Festival of 1953. Ugetsu received a standing ovation and won the Silver Lion of the year. The media reported Kawakita accompanying and introducing Mizoguchi to the audiences in Venice as a member of the Daiei studio's representative groups that promoted Ugetsu. Ironically, after the year-long expensive production in Japan, it was not Anatahan but Ugetsu that allowed Kawakita to accomplish his task of bringing Japanese film to Europe.

Although Anatahan was preconceived by Kawakita and Sternberg to be a film that disseminated an “accurate image” of Japan, ultimately they could not find common ground as to what an “accurate image” meant. The rapid transformations occurring in political and social climates, as well as in the Japanese film industry, were affecting audience expectations in both Japan and the rest of the world. For the purpose of targeting different audiences in different countries, Anatahan went through two separate reedits since the initial release, as I have mentioned earlier. Kawakita traveled to Europe with the print of Anatahan in the summer of 1953. On his return, taking the advice of some European buyers, he replaced Sternberg’s narration with a Japanese boy’s awkwardly spoken English voice before distributing it in Great Britain. Sternberg’s commentary, which reflects his wish to introduce the beauty of Japanese tradition to the world, was considered an unnecessary mediation by a Western voice. Kawakita's substitute narration reflects the market-oriented need for Japanese
film to be more “authentically” Japanese – and not to be mediated by an American director’s voice.

Kawakita’s substitution of Sternberg’s narration reflected the overall Japanese reception of the film. The Japanese public refused to take seriously or ignored the complex text of Anatahan and, either explicitly or implicitly, they regarded it as a mere reflection of eroticism, colonial desire, and unnecessary paternal sympathy of an American filmmaker. For some, Sternberg’s voiceover created an objective and rational stance vis-à-vis the screen, while for others it was the decisive device that kept Japanese audiences away. Many critics put the film aside as “foreign” or remained indifferent as the film disappeared from the media discourse. This negation and indifference, along with other nationalist claims, can be read as two intertwining sentiments towards America in Japan around 1952 and 1953. A new nationalism arose in Japan in its quest for the nation’s political and economic autonomy in reaction to Japan’s continued subjugation to America even after the end of the occupation. Japan simultaneously and ironically began rushing towards the economic growth and consumer culture that were often equated as Americanization. Many film critics of the time thus interpreted the explanatory foreign voices and the objectified images of their national

subjects in Anatahan as violent cinematic and cultural disconnect within the context of ambivalent national sentiments towards the proximity between Japan and America. Although Sternberg incessantly spoke of his wish that the film was for Japan and the Japanese, the film was increasingly regarded and treated as a “foreign” film, literally and figuratively, in Japan, as if putting the film outside of the discourses of collective memory and/or national history.

Conclusion

Tracing the history of Anatahan from the prewar years through the year of its release in the wake of the US Occupation in Japan illuminates how the specific political and cultural circumstances helped to produce multiple meanings of the film. In other words, examining this history shows how different people projected their interests in creating the film as well as how they interpreted the film from different viewpoints. Examining the laborious efforts made by Sternberg and his Japanese production team helps us to understand the heavily mediated and collaborative nature of this little-known international co-production, which resulted in adding complex layers to the film text. The Japanese reception of the film reflects a collective wish to forget the defeated,
and devote time to develop the rising nationalistic sentiment in the post-occupation era. On the one hand, this unwilling recollection of wartime memory was expressed in some critics’ reference to the collective rejection of the Sternberg’s intervention for the sake of forgetting. On the other hand, the film was dismissed as a visualization of trivial and personal memory, only pertinent to a small number of Japanese who underwent similar experiences.

In reinforcing my point of the collaborative authorship of Anatahan, I would like to introduce the fragmented but intriguing record of Sternberg’s letter addressed to cinematographer Okazaki Kozo. Sternberg’s letter politely asks Okazaki to film some footage for his 1958 reediting of the film, which remarkably shows the “tyrannical” director paying great respect to his important collaborator. Sternberg also detailed his instructions referring to the art of the 18th century Japanese ukiyo-e masters in the letter. He directed Okazaki to re-photograph a series of extreme long shots of a naked woman on the beach “in the fashion of [Suzuki] Harunobu,” whose woodblock printings called shunga were famous for sensual postures of male kabuki actors and their lustrous sexual relationship with their young male servants. He also instructed Okazaki to make the ocean waves in empty scenery shots to be like the highly stylized big waves with white edges and splashes created by wind, seen in Katsushika Hokusai’s The Great Wave off Kanagawa. Following Sternberg’s instructions, Okazaki filmed from behind a nude woman running towards the ocean, using an actress whose body profile resembled that of Negishi Akemi, in a long static frame. Sternberg replaced some existing shots with the new footage in 1958.

What came after this 1958 reedited film was Sternberg’s endorsement of the 1958 version as the authentic and original film, and his painstaking effort to redistribute the film in the US. Sternberg’s final attempt of reediting and redistributing the film demonstrates his awareness of the changing tastes of US audiences in the 1960s. The difficulty and failure of the process have been painfully imprinted on the surface of the film, particularly visible on the inconsistency of lighting and grainy texture between the old and the new footage, with multiple titles such as The Devil’s Pitchfork (1954), Anatahan (1954), and The Saga of Anatahan that was used for both the 1953 Japanese version and his 1958 “original” version.

In his 1965 autobiography, Sternberg ended his reflection on Anatahan with a long quotation from Philippe Demonsablon’s article published in Cahiers du cinema, which was his favorite review written on the film. Demonsablon recognized that Sternberg’s narration comments on actions, not emotions, pointing out that the spectator’s pleasure lies in the very break, in the disconnect “between the detached voice and the desire of the characters on screen.” Except for a few, many Japanese critics and general audiences did not see the subtle effect of the audio-visual expression, being too caught up in the dark abyss between national history and memory, between the national and the foreign, and in the hasty rush towards 1950s project of economic miracle.

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A Translated Letter from Josef von Sternberg to Okazaki Kozo, A Recording of Interview with Okazaki Kozo (Tanaka Fumihito Private Collection).

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Scrapbooks, Herman Weinberg Collection (New York Public Library of Performing Arts).

End Notes

2 The film had favorable reviews in Paris, according to Sternberg’s autobiography listed above.
4 According to my research at the Kawakita Memorial Institute Library, these are not yet open for research.
7 The film’s alternative English title *A Daughter of the Samurai* was the direct translation of the German title (1937, Japanese title: *Atarashiki Tsuchi / Die Tochter des Samurai*).
8 The writing team for Document Showa interviewed Franck’s wife about how the offer to make the film in Japan came about. According to this interview and the book, Kawakita received the offer from his business friend in Germany after a government official contacted Frank and asked if he wanted to make a film in Japan. *Document Showa 4,* ed. NHK document Showa.
Either Yamaguchi Yoshio or Kogure Michiyo, 22 an article on Sternberg. Director of Cinematography Okazaki Kozo and Ishiwatari Hiroshi, (Toyo: Towa-sha, 1951). The book was later republished in September 1952, which was co-authored with another surrogate, Film months before the production began. Kawaïita Kashiyo, the wife of Nagamasa, wrote in her memoir that Toho suddenly refused to lend the studio space a few Show Business. 17 Mori Iwao, a Toho executive who was also just released from the expulsion just like Kawaïita and Ísawa, traveled to America 18 Kawaïita and Ísawa, traaveled to America and Europe from March to May in 1951. Upon Ísawa’s request to represent him, Mori met Sterngberg in New York. Mori and Sterngberg discussed some details to proceed with the Anatahan project. Mori Íwao, Watashi no geikai benreki [My Itinerary of the Show Business] (Tokyo: Seiido kidan, 1975).

1975)


Another version of The New Earth was made by Japanese filmmaker Itami Mansaku. Itami was hired to co-direct the film with Fanck, but he refused to work with Fanck and remained silent about the reason why he detested the work (Some accounts note that it was his anti-war stance that he maintained during the wartime). Itami did not even show up on the set for filming, and his The New Earth did not get enough critical and commercial attentions. 12 For more details of the production, see Michael Baskett, The Attractive Empire: Transnational Film Culture in Imperial Japan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Peter B High, The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years’ War, 1931-1945 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). The quote is on page 126 in The Attractive Empire.

13 Documents Showa – 4, 137-138.

14 Ibid., 139.

15 Sterngberg puzzled the journalists at the press conference held in Tokyo in August 1952 by telling them that he knew the incident by reading only four lines of the description reported in The New York Times in 1951. 16 Ísawa was promoted to the president of Toho in 1943. He resigned in March 1947, seven months prior to the official announcement of SCAP’s purge that enacted in October, partly because he took the blame for intensifying labor disputes that came to be known as the “Toho strikes.” For Ísawa’s presidency at Toho in relation to the Toho Strike from 1946 to 1948, see Forsawa’s presidency at Toho in relation to the Toho Striâee from 1946 to 1948, see

1992) 70-81. Also see Kobayashi Atsushi and Inoue Masato (eds), Anatahan, no setto o tañunete “Visiting the Production”, Kawaïita’s chart. Kawaïita and Ísawa, traaveled to America

1975) 137-138.

1951) 61-90.

21 The collective process was recounted by the primary members of the production, and documented in Tanaka Junichiro, et al., “Taiyo ha hitotsuji ni: Sterngberg kara ware ga nani o etake” [The Sun is One and Only: What We Learned from Sterngberg]. Kinema Junpo no.65 (July 15, 1953), 83-89.

22 The article on Anatahan in Cahiers du cinema no.168 (July 1965, 34-35) carries the chart.

23 From Meri von Sterngberg private collection.

24 The music director Ifukube Akira was also a relatively unknown composer at the time (Ifukube later became known for Toho’s Godzilla in 1954 as Tsuburaya). Ifukube composed several different music scores based on the requests for this film and finalized the hauntingly beautiful score in collaboration with Sterngberg. See Togashi Yasushi, “1953 Anatahan,” Ifukube Akira no uchu [The Cosmic of Ifukube Akira] (Tokyo: Ongakunotomosha, 1992), 70-81. Also see Kobayashi Atsushi and Inoue Makoto (eds), Ifukube Akira no Eigaongaku [Music for the Motion Pictures by Ifukube Akira] (Tokyo: Waiizu shuppun, 1998).

25 There are many interesting technical details from Okazaki’s lively memoir as a head camera operator under Sterngberg’s direction of cinematography.

26 “Anatahan o eigaku; hiroin ha Yamaguchi Yoshiko ka Kogure Michiyio” [Film Adaptation of Anatahan: The Heroin Will Be Either Yamaguchi Yoshiko or Kogure Michiyio], Hokkoku Shinbun II (July 31, 1952). From Anatahan Scrapbooks, Kawakita Memorial Library.

27 “Anatahan Monogatari: Kyoto de seisaku kaishi” [Anatahan Story: Production will start in Kyoto], Kinema Junpo no.50 (Nov 1, 1952), 79.

28 The film also has some scenery shots and archived documentary footage showing Japanese families welcoming returning soldiers. A recorded interview with Okazaki Kozo, date unknown. Courtesy of Tanaka Fumihito.

29 Ogi Masahiro, a critic who visited the studio, Cary Grant, and many others claimed that they had never seen such elaborate sets and a large open studio. See Ogi, Josef von Sterngberg kantoku no Anatahan, no setto o tazunete [Visiting the Production Set of Josef von Sterngberg’s Anatahan], Kinema Junpo no. 57 (Feb. 15, 1953), 34-37; see also Okazaki, Himawari to kyamera: satuuei kantoku Okazaki Kozo ichidaiki, 70.

30 From Meri von Sterngberg’s private collection.

31 The quote is from the narration for the final scene, which is written in the Script A. Ibid.

32 A few of the many examples are “Watashi wa joobachi deha nai’ Anatahan Higa Kazuko no sugao” [I am not a Queen Bee’;\n
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Bare Face of Higa Kazuko of Anatahan], *Asahi Weekly* (December 7, 1951), 16; “Anatahan no shinso” [Truth about Anatahan], *Yomiuri Weekly* (March 1, 1952), 16; “Sukusuwareta Higa Kazuko: Anatahan anokoku no tenashi” [A Dark Angel of Anatahan: Rescued Higa Kazuko], *Asahi Weekly* (March 1, 1952), 8.

33 Josef von Sternberg, “Anatahan no yume.” [Dream of Anatahan], *All Yomimono* (October 1952), 181.

34 Ibid.


36 Anatahan no shinso ha koreda! [This is the Truth about Anatahan]. Released in April, 1953. 

Shin-daito eiga Production. 7 reels, B&W. Dir: Morino Jiro.


40 “Review, Anatahan/’The Saga of Anatahan.’” *Kinema Junpo* no.67 (July 1, 1953), 113.

41 Anatahan was shown as a matinee on August 24 at the Venice. *Ugetsu* was at 8:00 p.m. on the same day, which was the prime time. The media reported on the Venice mainly discuss *Ugetsu*, and rarely comment on the selection and reception of *Anatahan*. See, for example, Shimizu Chiyota, “Venice eigasai ni shusseki site” [Cinema Travelogue from Europe: Report on Venice Film Festival], *Kinema Junpo* no.73 (Sept. 15, 1953), 28-31.

42 A short report on Kawakita’s comment on this regard was published in *Kinema Junpo*. He expected to release Anatahan through distributor London Films in England and to further release in Germany, Sweden, Norway, and South Africa. He told the press “because there is a problem in Sternberg’s English narration, I decided to replace it with an English voice with Japanese-accent.” This print, with a British authorization mark in the beginning, is available for viewing at the National Film Center, Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. See “Anatahan oshu kokai kettei; Kawakita Towa Eiga shacho kikokudan” [Anatahan’s European Distribution is Decided: President Kawakita of Towa Film Co. Returns and Talks], *Kinema Junpo* no.72 (September 1, 1953), 87.

43 The letter that Okazaki possesses was translated into Japanese for him. I would like to thank Tanaka Fumihito, a filmmaker and a close friend of the late Okazaki, who shared with me this precious letter.
