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Richard M DAVIS

Singapore Management University, richarddavis@smu.edu.sg

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Whose Blue Heaven? Musicality in the early Japanese talkies

Richard M. Davis

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Tsinghua University, Beijing, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the advent of synchronized sound production in Japan in 1931 – three years later than the United States – and the generative ambiguities of how sound and music's relationship to film was figured in that year's anxious discourse. I argue that this 'belatedness' is echoed in relationships of on-screen image and offscreen sound, noise, and music in two important early sound films, *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* (Gosho 1931) and *A Topsy Life* (Kimura 1933).

KEYWORDS

Japan; early sound film; musicals; offscreen space; modernity

Introduction

The final scene of 1931's *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* (*Madamu to nyōbō*, Gosho) opens in what looks to be the countryside, a dirt road that runs through a pastoral landscape awash in flowers. In the middle distance, framed off-center, a group of rustic-looking farmers strains at a kind of wooden mill out in the meadow. Yet for all that the scene suggests the rural, there are reasons to believe we are in a different sort of place. For one, the houses in the background are in the trim, hybrid-Western style known at the time as 'culture homes' (*bunka jūtaku*); for another, there are electrical poles running between them. After a moment, we realize that the meadow, too, is littered with sections of metal piping wide enough for a man to comfortably crawl through – a water main, perhaps, or sewage system on the way. Finally, a little girl runs up the road into the foreground, dressed in middle-class attire of a bonnet and sundress, her arms full of balloons.

She and her father (Watanabe Atsushi) and mother (Tanaka Kinuyo), our protagonists, are out for a leisurely weekend stroll, pushing the newest member of the family along in a baby carriage. This is the space of the burgeoning Tokyo suburbs; their new rental house is just off-frame. Farmers go about their collective exertions, working ropes together in slow rhythm; they chant 'en'yakora' ('heave ho') with each pull. The daughter starts to mimic the chant and the gesture, and her father joins in, laughing. Then an airplane starts rumbling over, and the whole family runs over to get a better look – there it is, a tiny little point-of-view speck over the far buildings. Soon after, they and we hear the strains of 'My Blue Heaven' coming from the titular 'neighbor's wife' and her jazz band.¹ 'That song really brings me back,' the father says, and whispers something into his wife's ear that makes them both break into laughter. They walk together, his arm around her shoulders, la-la-

la'ing along with the melody, into the closing fade-out of their prosperous and contented future.

The Neighbor's Wife and Mine is widely recognized as Japan's first 'fully realized' or 'authentic' (*honkakuteki*) sound picture, that is, the first feature-length domestic production with synchronized sound throughout.² Unsurprisingly, it was a site of considerable interest for its contemporary filmmakers, movie critics, and a sizeable portion of the Japanese audience, and not merely for being the first of its kind – although that certainly was a cause for excitement – but also, I will argue, for the way it maps various ideological conflicts onto that technological shift. I've described the above scene at length because it does a marvelous job of condensing many of the issues and concerns that animated discussions of the film, as well as the talkies that followed it. These include conflicts over urban modernity, rural tradition, and the liminal space of the suburbs; conflicts over class, decorum, and public behavior; conflicts over Westernization and Americanization; conflicts over consumption, subjectivity, and value; and even conflicts over genre. Though billed as 'non-sense comedy' (*nansensu kigeki*), and called by some accounts a *shōshimingeki* (lightly comedic dramas about the *petit bourgeoisie*, a Shōchiku specialty), I discuss *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* as a 'musical film' – indeed, diegetic music is central to both the film's plot and its pleasures – in order to elucidate the era's common concerns over musicality, sound, and noise.

This article treats the years 1931 through 1933 as a time of crisis, not just for the Japanese film industry in the process of retooling but also for the musical film itself. Looking closely at this transitional period reveals that there was never a stable and clearly-bounded object called the 'musical film' in Japan, least of all in the early 1930s. Instead there were a profusion of terms of different Japanese, English, French, Italian, and hybrid origin used to categorize films with musical qualities. The loan words *myūjīkaru* and *operetta*, inherited from earlier stage traditions, were common, as was *rebyū* (revue), referring specifically to films structured around a variety of musical acts performed on a diegetic stage. Other writers used the newly coined Japanese terms *kayō eiga* (song film) and *ongaku eiga* (music film), or sometimes the variant *ongaku kigeki eiga* (music comedy film); the hybrid *myūjīkaru eiga* also appeared with some frequency. Some of these terms ostensibly draw categorical lines between different sorts of film texts, but nevertheless they vary from writer to writer and, overall, speak to – and in fact generate – an epistemological jumble. A film like *Singing Lovebirds* (Makino 1939), for instance, might be described in different days' advertising copy as a 'jazz period film,' a 'jazz operetta film,' or an 'operetta period film' (Nikkatsu).³

As the above mention of 'crisis' may suggest, this methodology is derived in part from Rick Altman's notion of 'crisis historiography' (2004). New representational media, Altman argues, do not arrive fully formed, autonomous, and legible as such. Instead, 'new technologies are always born nameless'; the way they are defined is 'both socially and historically contingent' (17–19). Their capacities for representation are only comprehensible in terms of the representational media (plural) that precede them, and of which they are initially thought to be subsets or offshoots. Moreover, at any time there are multiple self-interested actors advocating different names and schema by which these technologies are to be understood, deployed, and enjoyed. While nomenclature does stabilize eventually, its constructions are also 'ongoing and multiple,' the result of many conflicts and compromises over a wide array of social, cultural, and legal venues (21).

Sasagawa Keiko (2004) offers one approach to historicize this problem in Japan, arguing that there was a clear semantic difference between *myūjīkaru* and *ongaku eiga*, where the former referred to Hollywood products – and the films of other countries, particularly Japan, which attempted to adapt them – and the latter to films that fell outside this stylistic and narrative tradition. She claims that *ongaku eiga* were initially European films like René Clair's *Under the Roofs of Paris* (1930, released in Japan 1931), but in time expanded to productions derived from what Sasagawa calls the 'second, older lineage' of Japanese musicals: those which began with onstage musicians playing *naniwabushi* and *kouta* during the silent era, and became musicals based on these more-or-less traditional *ongyoku* forms (2004, 321–324). This line of thinking echoes Rick Altman's insight that what we (later) think of as new forms of representational technologies are in fact always initially understood as 'several quite different phenomena, each overlapping with an already existing medium' (2004, 19). Here two films that would later be lumped together as 'musical' might, in fact, be comprehensible to their contemporaries through the frameworks of two entirely different *media*, one cinematic and one theatrical.

In order to open up the crisis dimensions attending the various births of the musical's 'technologies' in Japan, we might thus consider the 'musical film' not as a distinct genre – a discursive compact between audiences and filmmakers, delineating a range of narrative, stylistic, and affective pleasures spectators can expect to be satisfied (and sometimes creatively thwarted) by any given film – but rather as a mode that is, effectively, an inflected form of synchronized film sound technology itself. I find support for this conceptual shift in a curious phrase used by *Kinema Junpo* writer Horiuchi Keizō, who in an early article refers to *ongakuteki eiga* (musical film) instead of the familiar *ongaku eiga* (music film) (1931, 93). With this adjectival phrase, Horiuchi seems to indicate not *the* musical (genre), but rather *films with musical characteristics, films marked by musicality*. I read this notion of *ongakuteki eiga* as pointing to a mode of filmmaking that can cut across otherwise dissimilar genres and geopolitical boundaries, and in turn help us to reconsider the relatively sparse body of Japanese-produced *ongaku eiga* (and/or *myūjīkaru* etc.) within a broader field of cinematic practices and discourses. Simultaneously, the idea of the musical mode can deepen our understanding of the pleasures that Japanese audiences took in domestically-produced musicals, described by Aaron Gerow as stemming from a 'hodge-podge of readings of musical strategies, the gaps between genre expectation and between national identities' (2012, 158).

By emphasizing the ambiguity and conflict surrounding early discourse on the Japanese musical film, I seek to open a critical avenue by which to discover analogous dynamics in the films themselves, arguing that they recapitulate the socioeconomic conditions of their development in ways explicit and implicit, and in turn render those conditions visible – and audible – for their audience. This article proceeds by first briefly examining the discourse on synchronized sound and musicality in the crisis years of 1931 to 1933, as well as providing an historical account of the emergence of the talkie and the musical genre in the 1930s. Next I turn to two film texts – *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* and the 'first authentic musical' in Japan, *A Topsy Life* (Kimura 1933) – to reveal how the fraught relationships between music and Japanese modernity are thematized by the formal interactions between image and sound, and the capacity of certain characters to 'control' one or the other, or neither. In *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*, the playwright protagonist first battles the invasive, offscreen sounds of his environment, then finally

embraces them – in particular the modern (*modan*) ‘speed’ of his neighbor’s jazz band – in order to effect a personal transformation leading to a successful career.⁴ In *A Topsy Life*, though the lumpen protagonist does ultimately gain control over noise (as a sonic *mon-tagiste*⁵ scaring away burglars) and music (as the proprietor of a beer hall), his belated transformation robs him of his chance to win the girl.

I argue that these films reveal the ‘problem’ of music in the Japanese musical film by depicting the public and inescapable nature of music and its obverse, noise, in the modern city and its suburbs, by rendering it legible (or rather audible), and offering it up for potential critique. Writing of an analogous situation in contemporary continental Europe, Walter Benjamin describes how urban dwellers build up a ‘sensory shield’ against the daily shocks they experience in the city’s barrage of images, motion, and speed, and moreover how the camera, by defamiliarizing these processes in mechanical reproduction, allows the viewer to then become aware of them and to access them as a ‘vast and unsuspected field of action’ (2006 [2004], 117). I suggest that early Japanese musical films are engaged in a similar process regarding the aural shocks of the city: car horns, streetcars, factory whistles, machinery, crowd sounds; but also the music that is not yours, that comes upon you unexpectedly, from a room you cannot enter, from a *chindon’ya* sandwich-board band selling you something you do not want. Alongside Benjamin’s ‘optical unconscious,’ these films perform the awakening of an *auditory unconscious*, which can render sonic shocks into aesthetic objects, available to their audience – their auditors – in the modes of recognition, mastery, pleasure and play.

Recall again the closing moments of *The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine*, the collision between rural labor and suburban leisure, between voices chanting, an engine roaring, a jazz band playing, and a man and woman ‘singing along,’ wordlessly, to ‘My Blue Heaven,’ a famous American tune equally famous as a Japanese song. Who benefits from the modern and who loses? What does one gain from seeing it screened and hearing it amplified through loudspeakers? Just whose blue heaven is it, anyway?

Sound transformations

At the dawn of 1931 the Japanese film industry was still a silent one, despite two years of American and European sound pictures (‘talkies’) in Japanese movie theaters.⁶ Japan’s vibrant and prolific studios – five majors and roughly twice as many minors and independents, whose constellation shifted almost daily – had tried, and thus far failed, to come up with an economically and technologically viable synchronized sound system. Even China, long perceived by Japanese intellectuals as ‘behind’ in the race to technological modernity, was widely reported to be ramping up sound production.

The despair of the elite was profound. How had this deplorable state of affairs come to pass? That year’s special New Year’s issue of leading film journal *Kinema Junpo* published two articles, both titled ‘The Long-Awaited Japanese Talkie,’ that attempted to answer the question. The authors, Horiuchi Keizō and Negishi Kōichi, generally agree on two primary explanations. The first is economic: Japanese studios, now in the throes of a worldwide Great Depression, were simply unable to cover the costs of the transition to sound. Imported systems like the R.C.A. Photophone were prohibitively expensive, and moreover, given the largely vertically-integrated structure of the business, studios would have to shoulder the costs of installing sound equipment on both the production and reception

(i.e. theatrical) ends. Additionally, Japanese audiences simply didn't attend films in the numbers that American or European audiences did. The average Japanese went to the movies about three times a year; the average American fifty (Ishimaki 1931, 55). Just as this vast and enthusiastic domestic audience helped Hollywood amortize production costs in its post-WWI global expansion (Bakker 2008, 43–44), Japan's lack of a similar pool of ready capital greatly limited its ability to expand or innovate in the arena of sound. Likewise, Horiuchi believed that audiences had gotten used to the 'lavish' sound productions that Hollywood, with its resources and years of experience, was continually churning out; he feared that Japanese studios using cheap equipment and inexperienced crews simply wouldn't be able to compete (1931, 93).

The second problem is a cultural one. Though foreign talkies were fairly popular, they were still widely regarded as curiosities, rather than as a self-evident 'evolution' of the medium. According to Negishi, Japanese audiences simply didn't experience the voice issuing from the screen as the 'magic' it seemed elsewhere. Voice and image had long been conjoined through the dialogue, explanation, and extemporization offered by the *benshi* (or *katsuben*), a ubiquitous visual and aural presence in the 'silent' theater, and often more popular with audiences than the movies themselves. Of course, the fact that all talkies at this point spoke in a foreign language no doubt blunted the general enthusiasm for them. Negishi suspects that the Japanese language will be a pull of its own, but for the time being this was an untested theory, and an economic risk – one that, he glumly concludes, will probably keep Japanese talkies a 'dream' for the foreseeable future (1931, 86).

In fact, they would only have three more months to wait. The 'Dawn of the Japanese Talkie,' as *Kinema Junpo* put it, broke that April 11th with Shōchiku Kamata's surprise announcement that their in-house system, the 'Tsuchihashi-Style Shōchikuphone,' was fully up and running. Though in development for years, Shōchiku showed prudence in keeping their technology secret. Earlier efforts by independents like Mina Talkie were much spoken of in the press, but when they failed to produce results their companies suffered, and often folded. It was instead as a triumphant fait accompli that the Shōchikuphone debuted that summer, with *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*.

In the wake of the film's success, the Japanese film industry turned cautiously to widespread sound production. In some respects this would prove a slow process. In 1938, for instance, one third of films made in Japan were silent; as late as 1942, 14% of films exhibited were still silent (Freiberg 1987, 76).⁷ That said, more Japanese were presumably watching more sound films, and earlier, than those numbers seem to imply. The highly-capitalized studios Nikkatsu and Shōchiku moved as quickly as possible to wire their cinemas for sound, starting with their urban flagships; by October 1933, for instance, amplified sound could be heard in more than 80 percent of seats in Shōchiku theaters in Tokyo and Osaka (Raine 2018, 109). Nor was the division between talkies and silents as stark as it was in America. Michael Raine points out the importance of the transitional 'sound version,' or 'sound-ban' film – a film shot silently, with no recorded dialogue, but released with some non-diegetic music, sound effects, and 'silence as a segregated space for the vocal performance of the *benshi*' – produced in roughly equal numbers as talkies between 1931 and 1935, while the studios scrambled to build adequate synchronized sound production facilities (2018, 108–110). Overall, filmmakers, studios, and audiences alike were generally, if guardedly enthusiastic about the possibilities of

synchronized sound,⁸ and ultimately, the pleasure of the Japanese-speaking screen voice – most particularly the movie star’s – combined with non-diegetic music and sound effects, would prove a greater lure than *benshi*-narrated silent film.

Domestically produced sound film was thus a success in Japan, if not the rapid success it was elsewhere. Unlike in Hollywood, however, the musical genre played a relatively muted role in this transition. Understood as films whose *raison d’être* and chief pleasure is the diegetic performance of music (e.g. singing), musicals made up only a fraction of the total sound film production of most of the major studios – Nikkatsu, Shōchiku, Shinkō – in the 1930s.⁹ Their paucity may partly be explained by the great technical and economic demands musicals place on actors, filmmakers, and studios alike. Musical numbers often involve large casts performing very precisely coordinated movements on elaborate sets; even if the sound is post-recorded, as was increasingly the case in Japan after 1932 (and through most of the twentieth century), there is still a narrow margin for error: many things can go wrong, requiring retakes that consume film stock, studio time, and money. Couple this with the dizzyingly complex camera movement in the films of, say, Busby Berkeley, and it’s not hard to see how musicals were among the most expensive films made in the first few decades of sound.

Another factor may be the generally low quality of synchronized sound recording in Japan. Taguchi Ryūzaburō begins his polemical how-to book *Tōki* by saying, ‘The sound in Japanese talkies is bad, the recording levels barely passable, and theatrical amplification is hardly worth mentioning’ (1938, 1). Bad sound is of course much worse when music is involved, and not just for the audience. Famed tenor Fujiwara Yoshie, for instance, recalls how worried he was that bad sound recording in Mizoguchi Kenji’s *Furusato* (*Hometown*, 1930), an earlier attempt at a part-talkie, might damage his career (Shimizu 1975, 47).

It was only fledgling studio P.C.L. (Photo Chemical Laboratory) that fully embraced the musical film as an untapped market and means of product differentiation. Beginning with 1933s *A Topsy Life*, P.C.L. would go on to produce many of the best-known and most successful Japanese musical films of its era, often starring previously established singer-comedians from the Asakusa stage, such as Furukawa Roppa, Hanabishi Achako and Yokoyama Entatsu, and Enomoto Ken’ichi (Enoken). Enoken, in particular, in his twenty-seven eponymous films stretching between his talkie debut in 1934 and 1941, was said to be ‘box office gold,’ the single person most responsible, according to studio director Mori Iwao, for giving P.C.L. the financial clout to merge with J.O. Studios (another, smaller producer of musicals) to form Tōhō Studios in 1937 (Izaki 1993, 136).¹⁰

Critics, conversely, had very little use for Japanese musicals. *The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine* was top-ranked among the prestigious *Kinema Junpo* annual Best 10 list in 1931, but given the journal’s lukewarm review upon the film’s premiere, one suspects that the ranking was more to reward its technical accomplishments than artistic merits. Nor would any other musical film crack the list for the rest of the decade.¹¹ Enoken’s pictures fared especially poorly with critics – in proportion, one suspects, to their widespread popularity. For instance, *Kinema Junpo* likened his screen debut, *Enoken’s Youth Suikoden*, to the ‘dregs’ of foreign-made musicals, with ‘little to recommend it’ (Murakami 1934, 107). And of his final wartime film, *Tasuke-of-the-Cloudless-Heart* (1945), legendary *Asahi Shinbun* film critic Tsumura Hideo (‘Q’) complained ‘these moronic Enoken pictures are an insult to everyone’s intelligence’ (High 2003, 494).

As defined in generic terms, the Japanese musical film in its first decade thus had a relatively minor impact on the Japanese cinematic ecosystem. Yes, musicals were vitally important to P.C.L./Tōhō (and to Enoken fans), but to the other studios they were of only sporadic value, and to critics virtually none whatsoever. Musical films from the early transitional period (1931–33), however, emerged at a time of maximum (crisis) potential before studio practice solidified, technical possibilities became habitualized, and genre expectations grew routine. Put another way, this was the moment when the ‘musical mode’ was perhaps at fullest force, when films *with musical characteristics* stood to most powerfully reflect on the contradictions of the society they emerged from. Returning now to *The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine*, we will see how these conflicts play out in the relationships between sound, noise, and music, and on-screen and offscreen space.

The musical subject

As titled, *The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine* has a certain erotic appeal, evoking the climactic encounter between its playwright protagonist (Watanabe Atsushi) and his attractive neighbor and her rowdy ‘jazz’ band, who initially thwart his quest for a quiet environment in which to work. Less enticing, perhaps, though no less interesting is the film’s original working title according to its press release: *My Noisy Neighbor* (*Tonari no zatsuon*), or simply *The Noise Next Door* (‘Shōchiku Kamata kenkyū,’ 1931, 7). As both plot summary and original title suggest, the aural environment of the film’s characters is depicted as a problem from the onset. Tokyo proper (never pictured) is simply too noisy for Watanabe to carry out his creative, intellectual work. Because playwrighting generates his salary, the move is also vital for the family’s fiscal well-being: there is thus a link established early between quietude and the nuclear family’s capacity to thrive. The same could be said for the couple’s marital harmony. When Watanabe isn’t working, his wife scolds him relentlessly, to his great resentment. The suburbs offer the promise of quiet, spaciousness, productivity, and the functioning family unit. But at the same time, the then-burgeoning Tokyo suburbs are a profoundly liminal space: neither urban nor rural, they are figured as the site of conflict between those two seemingly incompatible modes of life. Watanabe’s task throughout the film will be to learn how to navigate these conflicts; *sound*, through his actions, becomes the metonymic object of concern.

This problematic plays out formally in the interactions between characters and on-screen and offscreen sounds, including of course noise and music, as well as silence as a structuring absence. Michel Chion describes this use of offscreen space as ‘active offscreen sound,’ that which raises questions and curiosity among both the characters and the audience (1990, 85). Repeatedly, we see that on-screen sounds are ‘safe’: contained by the frame, subordinate to the image, and bound to the agency of the characters pictured. Conversely, offscreen sound is threat and disruption, unmanageable and oppressive. It manipulates characters, rather than the other way around. Iwamoto Kenji describes this as a ‘spatial use of sound’ attributable to the influence of René Clair’s *Under the Roofs of Paris* (1930), whose opening in Japan coincided with the filming of *The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine* (1992, 320).

We see the power relationship between on-screen and offscreen sounds established as early as the first scene, which opens much like the final one, with a long shot of a bucolic suburban setting, planted fields in the foreground and Western-style cottages (‘culture

houses') standing prettily behind. Our playwright protagonist is announced first via an off-screen whistle. He leisurely strolls into frame, peeks at the painting in progress, and then moves in front of the painter to admire the scenery. The painter asks him to move, and he obliges, returning behind the man. Then he begins humming loudly. The painter gruffly tells him to 'keep it quiet.' Conflict ensues. The two insult each other's artistic sense, throw paint, toss one another's belongings into the field, grapple like children, and finally reconcile in a shared moment of erotic appreciation of the woman (later revealed to be 'Madam,' aka 'the neighbor's wife') who breaks up their fight. What motivates this scene is the power of the out-of-sight sound over the seen image, a problem depicted as ontological in nature. When Watanabe blocks the painter's line of sight, he can move, or be moved; for his humming, though, there is no equivalent fix. Sound radiates and fills a space; changing its point of origin may modulate its volume or quality, but not its presence or absence. One cannot turn one's head from an unpleasant noise, nor physiologically close one's ears. Sound intrudes.

Even more than the protagonist's humming, which still occurs on-screen, two offscreen events in this scene demonstrate this power of sound. First, as the men are scrambling in a field for their thrown objects, a dog's offscreen barking stops them in their tracks. They jerk around wildly and clutch each other in fear. Only after a cut do we see that the dog is in fact tiny, and leashed. Again, at the scene's close, an offscreen car horn pulls the painter from having the last words to Watanabe. The driver threatens to run over his painting if he doesn't move it immediately; he has no choice but to comply. In both instances, central narrative action is arrested and attention – the characters', the spectators', and often the camera's – is redirected to the unfixed space outside the frame.

The film's central storyline subsequently plays through many variations of the problematic between sound, noise, and music laid out in the opening scene. Having rented a suburban house – the same one the painter was painting – Watanabe sets to work on a new play, with a deadline fast approaching. (Although in truth Watanabe's general laziness and hedonism makes his motives a bit suspect.) Whenever he sits down to write, however, he is inevitably thwarted by offscreen sound. This is primarily figured over two long, parallel scenes, one at night and one during the day. In the first, offscreen noise distracts him again and again. There are mice squeaking in the attic, so he makes cat sounds to scare them off; then a tom cat on the prowl responds by yowling outside; he chucks a tin can at it, which scares it off, but also wakes the baby in the other room, who starts crying; etc. Noise begets more noise, and he cannot write; when his wife sings a lullaby, he too goes to sleep.

In the morning, his daughter tries to wake him with an alarm clock, a bell, and sing-song taunt. Each attempt fails. Thematically, of course, we understand that he can ignore the sounds because he wants to sleep, unlike those that occur while he works – an activity he carries out begrudgingly, at best. Formally, however, this scene bridges the parallel 'noise' and 'music' scenes, because in this case the sources of the sounds are largely shown in the same frame as Watanabe's sleeping head. In other words, they are contained within and in a sense subordinate to the image, which allows Watanabe to quite literally close his eyes against them.

Finally awake, he sits down to write again. This time it is the titular 'noise from next door,' the jazz music, song, and laughter that intrude from offscreen into his thoughts. There is no obvious way to make the music stop, so instead he closes

the curtains, crams his ears with cotton, and covers his head with a thick blanket – but nothing happens. There is no change to the volume of the music as the audience perceives it. Not only is he powerless to stop the music, he cannot even dull it; nor, by extension, can we. Lacking other options, he goes to the neighbor's house, intending to complain. Instead he gets caught up in the rehearsal, flattered by the band's attention and charmed by the prospect of interacting with Madam and another 'modern girl' dancer. After '*Supiido Jidai*' (Speed Era) they play '*Supiido Hoy!*' By the end he is clapping along, dancing, and singing to the chorus. So invigorating is the whole experience – he leaves singing 'Broadway Melody' – that upon returning home he immediately sets about writing. His wife's earlier suggestion that he could write faster by 'adjusting himself to the *tempo* of jazz' proves true; once he has done so, metaphorically embracing the speed of the modern city rather than the idyllic calm of the countryside, he can write better (and faster) than ever. Unsurprisingly, this contest is waged in the suburbs, on the geographic border between the two worlds, and the forces of urbanity have won out in the end. His wife may be furious that his inspiration came at the cost of a sexualized liaison outside the home but this appears to be the price she must pay.

As discussed at the beginning of this article, the final scene – announced by the film's sole intertitle, telling us that Watanabe went without sleep to 'speed up' his writing – shows the whole, happily reunited family taking a walk in their neighborhood, enjoying and even participating in various modes of sound production. In other words, the last scene attempts resolve and recuperate the film's principle conflicts by showing the protagonist(s) in a position of mastery over their sonic world. Not only has the squabbling couple been reconciled, and their economic woes dissolved into middle-class leisure, but both offscreen sound and noise have become newly available as sources for pleasure, amazement, nostalgia, and erotic recall. Additionally, the protagonists have transitioned from being passive objects bombarded by sound – permeated and penetrated by it, incapable of exercising agency in their own environments – to active subjects, participating in its production. Up through the blissful fade-out, this is unquestionably marked as a triumph – the family's newfound capacity to control, or at the very least accept, their sonic environments is figured as the precondition for their future thriving.

Interestingly, *Kinema Junpo's* review of *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*, while generally, if mildly favorable, nevertheless criticizes the film's use of 'more sounds than were necessary' (Tamura 1931, 77). Underneath this apparent criticism for the film's overeager 'showing off' of its new technologies, we may intuit in the writer a certain discomfort – disquiet, even. Recorded, mechanically reproduced, re-presented as an object of public contemplation and experience, the jarring, jangling *jouissance* of the Japanese modern soundscape had been made available to audiences for the very first time. And though the film's protagonists may have triumphed over this soundscape in the crucible of suburban conflict, their middle-class flight from the city would simply not have been an option for many of the film's viewers, critics included. Instead, a sense of their boundedness within the sonic prison of urban life – what I've called the auditory unconscious – may well have awoken through the experience. Hearing one's ambient noise refracted as representation could be distressing and liberatory in equal measure.

Noisemakers

Some two years after *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*, P.C.L. made its production debut with *A Topsy Life* (*Horoyoi jinsei*, Kimura 1933), a film that was received as Japan's 'first authentic musical' (*ongaku eiga* and *myūjīkaru* are both frequently used). I read *A Topsy Life* as structurally symptomatic of the conditions of its own production – namely, the 'belated' advent of the Japanese talkie – thus linking general conflicts over the modern to the more specific industrial conflicts surrounding technology, capital, and geopolitical imbalance. As in *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*, these contradictions are mediated and rendered legible to a Japanese audience aware of its position on the downslope of the 'geopolitical incline' via the particular binaries inherent to the musical mode: lyrics and music, music and noise, and music and image (Raine 2014, 7–9).

Following the credits, the film opens on a series of whip-pans that both transition to and serve as visual analogue for the dizzying horizontal motion of the Odakyu train station at 'Yōyō machi,' where a 'Romance Car' is just pulling out of the foreground. With the first jazzy strains of Edie Cantor's hit song 'Yes, Yes' (from Edward Sutherland's 1931 *Palmy Days*)¹² the low camera tracks right alongside the fashionable forms of Tokyoites: white-collar workers (*sarariman*) in their suits and ties and 'modern girls' (*moga*) in heels and smart skirts. Here we meet two of the film's three protagonists, selling treats to commuters. Fujiwara Kamatari's ice-cream boy is in love with Chiba Sachiko's Ebisu beer girl. One day, he confesses, he hopes to open a beer hall with her. It will start small but grow, and eventually they'll hire a jazz band. So saying, he jumps up and animatedly mimes the sounds of a jazz band: the film's first diegetic 'song.' Judging from his enthusiasm, and the way even practical Chiba gets caught up in the fantasy, the viewer might reasonably conclude that both his dreams – business success, romantic success – will be fulfilled by the film's conclusion. Oddly, though, in the end Fujiwara gets the beer hall but not the girl. (That privilege goes to his rival, a young music student played by Okawa Hachirō.) The transition from his eager, if clumsy and threadbare imitation of 'real' music in the first scene to the actual jazz band in the last scene as the film plays out a familiar heroic narrative of aspiration, failure, striving, and success – albeit one with a twist. Success is only partial. The strikingly bittersweet final scene – the film actually ends on a shot of Fujiwara smiling through tears, while downing a beer – becomes more legible when read as the (un)just desserts of belatedness. Both narratively and historically, you can never catch up all the way. Fujiwara's failure to get the girl is all the more striking in light of the overwhelming focus of Classical Hollywood musicals on stories of heterosexual coupling: protagonists who are, in Rick Altman's words (borrowed from Fred Astaire), 'fated to be mated,' and narratives structured around the ultimate resolution of gendered binaries (1987, 31).

While the film's narrative may reveal an awareness of unevenness in terms of economic and cultural production in the international arena, it simultaneously promotes and celebrates the capacity of music (and by extension, the musical film) to bind variously gendered and classed spaces through shared experience. One remarkable example is a montage sequence that shows Okawa's debut song, 'Love Is a Magician' (*Koi wa majutsushi*), becoming a hit. First, a single record is shown spinning on a phonograph. As the song plays, the image multiplies as though seen through a kaleidoscope. Then a series of alternating shots of disparate locales follows – public and private spaces, spaces of

leisure and domesticity; a beach, a dancehall, a parlor, a crowded street – interspersed with shots of phonographs, again surrounded by the iconographic markers of daily life for different classes and sexes. (The sequence ends, comically enough, with a phonograph playing in the dean’s office at Okawa’s music college, from which he is summarily expelled for ‘crimes’ against music and the public good.)

By displaying the power of music to unify a national community, *A Topsy Life* recalls the celebrated ‘Isn’t it Romantic?’ sequence in *Love Me Tonight* (Mamoulian 1932). In the latter, a melody, rather than a whole song, spreads organically from Paris to the French countryside, transmuting along the way from popular song to march to gypsy violin piece to, finally, operatic aria. The implication is that a (catchy) tune suffices to disseminate itself, and moreover is infinitely adaptable to local conditions. The contemporary fact of music as a mass commodity is concealed beneath a romantic ideology of its transcendental power. Conversely, *A Topsy Life* tacitly acknowledges that full participation in modern national culture requires participation in common patterns of consumption. That said, unlike the printed materials that Benedict Anderson (1983, 24–46) pinpoints as the locus of the ‘imagined community’ of the early-modern nation, music’s sonority gives it a public – and indeed unavoidable – character that the written language lacks.

One scene in *A Topsy Life* demonstrates these contradictions particularly well. As a poor vendor, Fujiwara lacks the resources to buy a phonograph, and so cannot physically possess ‘Love Is a Magician.’ But the song is constantly being played in public, and its lyrics are even displayed outside a music store. Thinking the song catchy, and its romantic lyrics particularly apt to his feelings for Chiba, Fujiwara copies them down, and then haltingly attempts to sing to her at the train station. Unbeknownst to him, however, the song was actually written for her, by the man she really loves, but who has, following his expulsion, been dragged back to his family home in the provinces. Brokenhearted, she tells him she hates the song. Fujiwara concurs; it’s a dumb song. They sit in silence for a moment. And then a marching band strikes up ‘Love Is a Magician’ in the street, part of the record company’s promotional campaign. As with the frazzled playwright in *The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine*, they can do nothing but listen. Music is here figured as a part of the urban white noise, but one uniquely ‘colored’ by its emotional – and in this case, personal – resonances.

The film’s penultimate scene, conversely, demonstrates the narrative power that comes with mastery over sound. Here we see Fujiwara attempt to repel a gang of thieves he’s overheard plotting to assault the Okawa-Chiba household.¹³ Racing ahead of them, he first imitates a thief himself, to convince the couple to stay in their bedroom ‘no matter what.’ Then he starts gathering up every conceivable noisemaker in the place: a metronome, two tambourines, a xylophone, various pots and pans and metal buckets, ladles, cymbals, glass bottles, a ukulele, even a cat and dog. Most of these he strings around the living room, tying them to a centrally placed rocking chair. The moment that the gang sounds the attack, he unleashes a cacophony from inside. He rocks frantically back and forth so the objects crash together (including a Beethoven doll bouncing up and down on the piano keys), meanwhile hammering on whatever musical instrument is at hand.¹⁴ The burglars are terrified, and run off. In defending his lost love, in other words, Fujiwara stakes his own successful claim as a sonic *montagiste*. He has moved from passive object of ambient music to active subject of purposeful sound. However, as mentioned above, Fujiwara’s success is belated, and thus only partial: he banishes the burglars, and will soon have his beer hall, but he has already lost the girl. Moreover,

the sonic mastery Fujiwara eventually gains isn't primarily over music, but over noise; the musical instruments he picks up in the climactic scene are simply noisemakers, functionally identical to pots and pans. While elsewhere *A Topsy Life* suggests the link between musical mastery and the power of sexual and/or romantic conquest, Fujiwara's montage of noise, alas, has only the power to repel.

Conclusion

In this article, I have asked how the Japanese musical film in its earliest incarnations negotiated its fraught status as a *modan* cinematic form influenced by foreign examples, while at the same time depicting modern (which is to say, contemporary and urban/suburban) settings, stories, and lifestyles to be consumed as images – and, for the first time, sounds – by a general domestic audience. In *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* and *A Topsy Life*, formal conflicts between image and sound, music, and noise, mirror the male protagonists' striving for social status, financial success, and sexual capacity within the crucible of the Japanese modern. Sound, noise, and music are variously coded as promise, as threat, and as the social fabric of the nation itself.

I've argued, however, that sound's polysemantic possibilities are also tied to a particular moment within the musical mode, a crisis time that followed in the immediate aftermath of Japan's first synchronized sound film productions. Within a few years, sound would become largely normalized, familiar to audiences and a routine part of most filmmakers' stylistic toolboxes. In other words, sound was no longer a problem: not for the industry, not for filmmakers, and not for movie characters. The potential for musical films to awaken their audience's auditory unconsciousness through solely formal means would similarly be weakened. Moving into the mid-1930s and beyond, musical filmmakers would instead need to draw on new resources, like parody, intertextuality, and genre hybridity if they hoped to achieve similar ends.

Notes

1. Gene Austin's 1928 version of Walter Donaldson and George A. Whiting's song was one of the biggest-selling pop singles of its age. In Japan, Futamura Teiichi's version that same year, under the translated title '*Watashi no aozora*,' would be a career-making hit. On the usage of the word 'jazz' (*jazu*) in Japan, E. Taylor Atkins cautions that 'if one applies the current, accepted musicological criteria for defining 'jazz' as a style ... little of the music that Japanese (or Europeans or Americans, for that matter) knew as 'jazz' in the twenties and thirties would qualify In the interwar period the word *jazz* could and did refer to a number of different things ... to popular music, social dance, or other forms of American popular culture sweeping Japan after World War I; yet it also connoted a new set of social mores, fashions, gender relations, and consumer practices also known as 'modernism' (*modanizumu*)' (Atkins 2001, 47).
2. Despite this reputation, several other 'part-talkies' preceded *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*, though the most recent, *Furusato* (Mizoguchi 1929) had come a full two years earlier. Although these early efforts were largely unsuccessful, from both technological and commercial perspectives, Shimizu Akira cautions against a dyadic history that resigns them to the status of 'experimental,' as opposed to the 'authentic' (*honkakuteki*) talkie that was to come, saying these terms have 'a magical tendency to make us forget the groundbreaking work of the pioneers' (Shimizu 1975, 120).
3. Printed in *Asahi Shinbun* and *Mainichi Shinbun Osaka Yūkan* between December 10 and 13, 1939.

4. The loan word *modan* ('modern') differs in usage and implied critical judgment from the Sino-Japanese term *kindai* ('modern'). According to Iwamoto Kenji, the latter 'encompasses the good and ill done by the arrival of European rationalism in both thought and science,' the grave problem the Japanese state sought to 'overcome' in the prewar and wartime period. Conversely, *modan* conveys more the positive image of 'easy frivolity, brightness, and newness' – those qualities most associated with entertainment cinema (1991a, 6–7).
5. Miriam Silverberg describes Japanese interwar culture as 'montage' culture (following Sergei Eisenstein), where the clash of visual dissimilarities, of indigenous and imported cultural qualities, in both the sights of the city street and the pages of magazines read in the hinterlands, generates the possibility of 'a transcoding process that enabled the consumer to maintain a sense of indigenous identity while both moving within and creating a montage of foreign gestures, objects, and words' (2006, 32). These foreign qualities could then be decoded and 'reen-coded as *modern* [*modan*],' as available, in other words, for incorporation into a modern (Japanese) life (32).
6. Iwamoto Kenji (1991b, 236) points out that sound pictures were not necessarily released in the same historical order in Japan as they were elsewhere. For instance *The Jazz Singer* (1927), long heralded as the first successful (part) talkie in the United States, wasn't screened in Japan until August 1930, a year after films like *Innocents of Paris* (1929) and *College Love* (1929) first appeared.
7. In America, by comparison, the majority of theaters and all major Hollywood studios had switched to sound film exhibition/production by 1930 (Crafton 1997, 165).
8. Less so the theatrical musicians and *benshi*, whose livelihoods mostly dried up within the decade.
9. Examples of their musicals films include *Singing Lovebirds* (1939) at Nikkatsu and arguably *The Love-Troth Tree* (1938) at Shōchiku. A few musical films were also produced under Daiei – formed by the state-enforced 1942 merger of Nikkatsu, Shinkō, and Daito – such as *Palace of the Singing Raccoon-Dogs* (1942).
10. As a measure of his popularity, in every year between 1937 and 1940, Enoken had at least one film among Tōhō's five highest box office grosses: *Enoken's Chakkiri Kinta* and *Enoken's Santa of Edo* in 1937 (numbers four and five respectively), *Enoken's Hōkaibō* in 1938 (number five), *Enoken's A Surprising Life* and *Enoken's Mori no Ishimatsu* in 1939 (numbers four and five respectively), and *Songokū* in 1940 (number four). Likewise his films were among the industry's overall top earners in each year from 1942 to 1944: *The Tale of Isokawa Heisuke's Great Deeds* was number ten in 1942, as was *Hyōroku's Dream Tale* in 1943; in 1944, amazingly, *Three-Foot-Tall Sagohei* and *Idaten Boulevard* ranked fourth and fifth (Furukawa 2003, 42–173). According to Johan Nordström, in films like *Enoken's The Magician*, P.C.L./Tōhō budgeted more for Enoken (and his troupe) than any other single production cost – between a quarter and a fifth of their total outlay – a clear marker of Enoken's star-status within the system (Nordström 2014, 190–191).
11. Though an imperfect point of comparison, American musical films were not infrequently nominated for Outstanding Production (today's Best Picture) at the Academy Awards. Examples from three subsequent award ceremonies include *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931), *42nd Street* (1933), and *The Gay Divorcee* (1934).
12. I'm indebted to Toshiaki Satō (2002, 5) for this reference.
13. The burglars are all disguised in Groucho Marx glasses, complete with bushy eyebrows, nose and moustache – a telling reminder of the international circulation of signifiers within the mass culture of the day.
14. It's telling of P.C.L.'s limited resources that the scene plays out less through actual sound effects than through a piece of non-diegetic music acting as an aural metaphor, with a few sound effects mixed in. The audience, in other words, hears the emotional tenor of the noise – brassy, vertiginous, slightly discordant – not the noise itself.

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Notes on contributor

Richard M. Davis currently teaches film studies and literature in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He is a graduate of the University of Chicago's Joint PhD Program in East Asian Cinema, where his dissertation focused on Japanese musical films of the Fifteen-Years' War (1931–1945).

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