Eye of the Machine: Itagaki Takao and Debates on New Realism in 1920s Japan

Naoki Yamamoto

An Alternative Approach to the Alternative

Any history of non-Western film theory must proceed through a series of encounters between a variety of critical writings that would enrich, or perhaps alter, our conception of cinema and its experience. This expectation is justified at a time when, as D.N. Rodowick argues, we are in need of "a more conceptual picture of how film became associated with theory in the early twentieth century, and how ideas of theory vary in different historical periods and national contexts."[1] Rodowick's call for different genealogies of film and its theories is clearly motivated by the shifting position of cinema in today's media environment. As nearly every aspect of film production, distribution, and exhibition becomes digitized through the dissemination of new media platforms, it becomes imperative to revisit the question, "What is cinema?" And precisely because the corpus of major film theories premised on the ontological stability of the photographic image has already proved defunct in addressing this question in earnest, scholars in the twenty-first century have begun to explore different sets of discourses on the experience of the moving image, focusing in particular on those developed either before or outside the institutionalization of Anglo-European film studies.[2] It is in this historical dynamic that one can situate the timeliness of growing interest in non-Western film theory: after the long and nearly total absence in our curricula, it now reemerges before us as a promising alternative to reimaging the very object of our study.

To emphasize the validity of the study of non-Western film theory, however, is not the same as to assume the utility of non-Western critical writings on cinema

as a given. Rather, it is crucial to remember that what we think constitutes the main body of non-Western film theory is far from monolithic in terms of its publication formats—essays, manifestos, film reviews, book-length studies, round-table talks, and so on—and thus it always requires a careful interpretation and contextualization of the texts in question before proclaiming any value and potential uses. This seemingly modest proposal is of particular importance to me as a specialist of Japanese cinema. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, when film studies as an academic discipline was still in its formative period, Japanese cinema was frequently deployed to prove the efficacy of Western critical theory.[3] A prime example here is Noël Burch's *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (1979). In this influential study, Burch highlights the conceptual uniqueness of Japanese film practice by stressing its radical detachment from both "the ideology of realism" and "the very notion of theory."[4] And in doing so, as Aaron Gerow points out, "Burch constructs Japanese culture as resistant to, and thus a critique of, Western logocentrism and its cinematic equivalent, Classical Hollywood cinema" from a poststructuralist standpoint.[5] It is, of course, possible to refute Burch's construction of an anti-realist and anti-theoretical Japanese cinema by exploring a previously neglected set of theoretical debates on cinematic realism developed in Japan over the past century. And yet, if such an excavation were motivated only by a desire to promote Japan as a promising alternative for the Western mode of film writing, then it would simply be a reiteration of Burch's argument from another perspective.

Another, and closely related, working principle I want to suggest is that we should refrain from treating non-Western film theory as the discourse of the Other. Since the rise of postcolonial theory in the early 1980s, scholars such as Julianne Burton and Homi K. Bhabha began to take issue with the hegemony of Western critical theory and its uncritical application to the cinemas of the Third World.[6] Following this timely intervention by postcolonial scholars was the publication of studies that made the most of primary materials either written by non-Western filmmakers themselves or excavated through extensive archival research.[7] However valuable and informative, this new approach still remained problematic for its relentless, inward-looking search for the distinctive features of non-Western films. Privileging a specialized knowledge about the cultural history of a given national or regional context, such studies served more as an empirical account of the particularity of local film practices than a collective effort to subvert the geopolitical imbalance in the discursive constitution of film studies. In addition, scholars with either postcolonial or area studies backgrounds tended to employ particular terms such as "alternative" or "compressed" in their accounts of non-Western modernity, understandably aiming to avoid a simple equalization of modernization and Westernization. Nevertheless, such a marked emphasis on

the alterity of the non-West in turn reinstates the singularity of the West in the articulation of twentieth-century modernity, insofar as it gauges its purported uniqueness through perceived differences and deviations from the Western center. Alternatively, a truly productive study of the history of non-Western film theory must be capable of overcoming this troublesome dilemma imposed by so-called "modernization theory."[8] But how can we produce a new approach that abandons such a common practice of self-Orientalization?

As a tentative answer to this methodological challenge, I propose an alternative approach that finds great value in the seemingly derivative and inauthentic work of a non-Western theorist who expressed more palpable similarities than differences to his European counterparts. In what follows, I examine a series of essays by the Japanese art historian Itagaki Takao (1894–1966), especially those collected in his 1929 monograph *Exchanges between Machine and Art* (*Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū*) [fig. 1].[9] In these pieces, Itagaki praises the functional beauty of modern machinery—airplanes, ocean liners, iron bridges, skyscrapers, and the cinema—as indicating completely new criteria for artistic and cultural production in the twentieth century. In this way, Itagaki's work tellingly foregrounds the synchronicity between the West and the non-West in their mutual aspiration for what one would call machine aesthetics, a new theory to give shape to social, cultural, and perceptual changes of everyday life engendered by the advent of modern technologies and new modes of mass communication. Nevertheless, as a participant in the international debates on machine aesthetics, Itagaki's critical intervention might appear minor and secondary, as his focus was mainly on the introduction to Japanese readers of the work of contemporary European artists, architects, and filmmakers such as Le Corbusier, László Moholy-Nagy, and Dziga Vertov.

On the other hand, Itagaki's contribution to our exploration of the history of non-Western film theory takes on greater significance when we read it as illustrating a more dynamic and complicated interaction between the West and the non-West. Indeed, the true innovation of Itagaki's writings lies in his creation of a new concept called "machine realism" (*kikai no riarizumu*), developed as a hallmark of his fascination with a cultural phenomenon often and retrospectively associated with 1920s modernism. Why, then, did he employ the term "realism" here, effectively blurring the alleged opposition between realism and modernism? To answer this, it is necessary to situate him in the specific discursive context of late-1920s Japan. In this local context, Itagaki presented his concept of machine realism as a critical response to the Marxist literary critic Kurahara Korehito's influential theory of "proletarian realism," proposed in 1928. Though sharing a similar desire to devise a new definition of realism more suitable to the increasingly elusive reality of the twentieth century, the divergence between the two
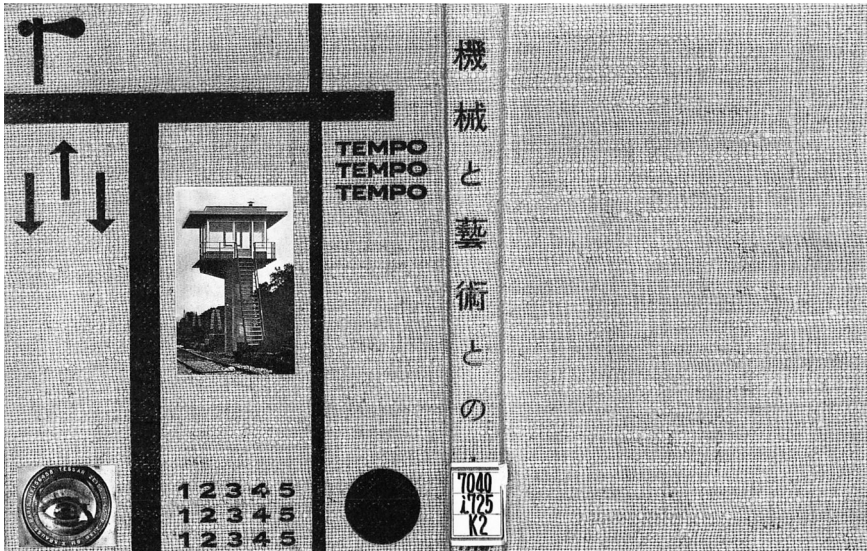
Figure 1. Front cover of Itagaki Takao, *Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū* (1929).

was unmistakable: while the former suggested viewing the world through "the eye of the machine" (*kikai no me*) to grasp the spirit of the modern age, the latter found it necessary to be equipped with "the eye of the proletarian vanguard" (*puroretaria zen'ei no me*) to envision a more advanced socialist society to come. Looking closely at what was at stake in their prognostic, if not thoroughly utopian, calls for a new social optics, this essay seeks to establish a new way of registering the historical significance and enduring relevance of non-Western film theory beyond the conventional dichotomy between the center (Europe) and the periphery (Japan).

Itagaki Takao and Machine Realism

Itagaki Takao was born in 1894 in Tokyo; by the time he graduated from high school, he had already developed a keen interest in European painting and architecture, especially from the Renaissance period, constantly browsing the foreign book section at the Maruzen bookstore. After studying European art and neo-Kantian philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, Itagaki began teaching as a lecturer at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Nihon University, and Keiō University. In this early period of his career, Itagaki apparently had no intention of straying from his academic discipline, diligently publishing works such as *A Survey of Western Art History* (*Seiyō bijutsushi gaisetsu*, 1922) and *The Historical Philosophy*

of the Neo-Kantian School (*Shin-Kanto-ha no rekishi tetsugaku*, 1922). A critical shift in Itagaki's career occurred in 1924–25, when he took a one-year research trip to Western Europe at the order of Japan's Ministry of Education. Unlike most of the Japanese intellectuals who visited Europe around the same time, however, Itagaki was initially indifferent or even insensitive to the burgeoning avant-garde art movements. Indeed, so faithful was he to the official mission imposed on him that Itagaki spent most of his time at museums and libraries collecting primary materials necessary for his academic research. Yet as he delved deeper into these primary materials, Itagaki soon recognized that his scheduled return to Japan would inevitably mean the loss of his privileged access to such rare documents. It is this academic dilemma about his position as a "distant observer" of classical Western art that caused him to turn his eyes toward contemporary art. In an autobiographical essay published in 1931, Itagaki refers to the practical reason behind his conversion retrospectively:

> For those living in the islands in the Far East . . . it is totally hopeless and unrewarding to produce a work based on historical research. Even when I was working on the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French paintings, I could not help but feel my geographical distance from Paris where the Bibliothèque nationale and the Musée du Louvre are located. . . . Once I entered the realm of contemporary art emerging after the World War, however, I found the sun shining brightly. Here we can access as many primary materials as we need as long as we prepare ourselves properly.[10]

Upon his return to Japan, Itagaki began accumulating primary data and concrete examples of what he saw as the art of the twentieth century. Traversing diverse fields of painting, architecture, design, photography, and film, this intensive research eventually resulted in astonishingly vibrant and prolific activities beginning in the late 1920s: First, in the years between 1929 and 1933 alone, Itagaki published more than ten monographs, including *Exchanges between Machine and Art* (1929), *The Acquisition of New Art* (*Atarashiki geijutsu no kakutoku*, 1930), and *Sociological Analysis of the Art of Superior Ships* (*Yūshūsen no geijutsu shakaigakuteki bunseki*, 1930), to name but a few. Second, in order to showcase his up-to-date knowledge of contemporary European art, Itagaki frequently collaborated with the young photographer Horino Masao (1907–2000). Under Itagaki's supervision, Horino soon became a leading figure in the New Photography (*shinkō shashin*) movement, skillfully adopting the latest techniques of photographic expression, including photomontage, typo-photo, and constructivist compositions.[11] Their collaborations culminated in Horino's 1932 landmark book *Camera, Eye x Steel, Composition* (*Kamera, me x Tetsu, kōsei*),

Figure 2. Typo-photo in "Dai-Tokyo no seikaku," *Chūō kōron* 46, no.10 (October 1931): Appendix 2–3.

which featured photographs of a transatlantic liner, a steel bridge, and a modern factory, all taken from a constructivist perspective stressing the functional beauty of those modern constructs.[12] Equally important in this respect was their 1931 photo-essay "Characteristics of Greater Tokyo" (*Dai-Tokyo no seikaku*) [fig. 2], as it aimed to visualize the energy of this ever-expanding city in the manner of László Moholy-Nagy's experimental and unrealized film script "Dynamic of the Metropolis."[13]

Third, and most importantly, Itagaki also took the initiative in creating a public forum on the issues of the avant-garde by launching his own journal *New Art* (*Shinkō geijutsu*, 1929–1930) and its short-lived successor *Studies of New Art* (*Shinkō geijutsu kenkyū*, 1931). Co-edited by leading critics of other fields, such as Iwasaki Akira (film), Sakashita Junzō (architecture), and Yoshikawa Shizuo (music), the journal assumed a truly interdisciplinary editorial policy and covered a wide array of topics that constituted the expanded definition of the arts in the twentieth century, including Surrealist painting, Constructivist theater, the "International Style" in architecture, industrial designs, Soviet montage theory, and the rise of the proletarian literature movement. Given such a remarkably

enterprising spirit, it is not surprising that *New Art* succeeded in drawing critical attention from a broad range of readers—even those from outside Japan. For instance, Iwasaki Akira's article "Film as a Means of Agitprop" (*Senden sendō shudan to shite no eiga*), published in the first and second issues of the journal, was widely read among Chinese readers through translation by the acclaimed writer Lu Xun.[14]

What makes Itagaki distinct from other supporters of avant-garde art movements in this period is the critical distance he always had from the objects of his speculation. In fact, Itagaki often referred to his stance as contemplative (*seikanteki*), stressing that he was not a practitioner but an observer of contemporary art. It is this allegedly neutral attitude that enabled him to include proletarian literature in his investigation of twentieth-century art, without becoming embroiled in turbulent party politics. In one of his editorials, Itagaki even went on to clarify his non-interventionist standpoint in disgust of commonplace disputes caused by political positioning: "*New Art Studies* is by no means an organ based on the demands of certain isms or claims. It is nothing but an experiment that aims to understand several aspects of the modern aesthetic as accurately as possible from a purely contemplative perspective."[15]

However, it should also be noted that such a seemingly apolitical statement often had a strong political connotation in its original context. As literary critic Hirano Ken points out, the years around the turn of the 1930s saw a three-sided struggle in the field of modern Japanese literature, involving naturalists (or "I-novelists" as they were called at the time), modernists (Yokomitsu Riichi's New Sensationist School [*Shinkankakuha*] and a more commercialized group called the New Art School [*Shinkō geijutsuha*]), and proletarian writers.[16] As they all took different paths in approaching the issues of art and politics in their own right, these three camps always had conflicts with each other and prevented their work from being discussed on the same critical criteria. Attempting to break into this stagnant situation, Itagaki deliberately chose to promote the saturation of modern machinery in the space of everyday life and the concomitant transformation of cultural and aesthetic values as the key to disentangling the chaos widely observed in late-1920s Japanese discourse on art and politics.

Itagaki's method of using the saturation of modern machinery as a catalyst to distill main characteristics of contemporary art was most succinctly demonstrated in the two articles he wrote in 1929, "Machine Civilization and Contemporary Art" (*Kikai bunmei to gendai bijutsu*) and "Exchanges between Machine and Art." To begin with, Itagaki argues that a new sensibility urging the viewer to see aesthetic values in modern machinery appeared as a phenomenon unique to the twentieth century, disseminated first by the work and written manifestos of Italian Futurists.[17] Consequently, what is usually called "machine aesthetics" can serve

as the most relevant cultural marker of his times. However, Itagaki also points out that there are at least two opposing attitudes toward the integration of the machine into art in the early twentieth century. Earlier attempts made by Italian Futurists and Russian Constructivists up until the late 1910s, on the one hand, were generally characterized by their "romanticist" tendencies, which more often than not ended up fetishizing the superficial beauty of modern machinery. On the other hand, the 1920s—especially the second half of the decade—witnessed the rise of a different attitude that put more emphasis on the inner logic of the machine, represented through terms such as *accuracy, rationality, progression, collectivity*, and *functionality*. Among those who promoted this view are the Swiss-born French architect Le Corbusier, the Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, and the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov. As Itagaki observes, their "anti-romanticist" attitude toward the machine is most succinctly manifested in Le Corbusier's famous dictum: "the house is a machine for living in."[18]

Itagaki goes on to examine how and to what extent the emergence of machine aesthetics in the early twentieth century has changed the traditional notion of the arts in general. It is in this query that the significance of modern architecture comes to the fore because it not only benefits from recent material innovations for construction—sheet glass for curtain walls, steel frames for structural support, and reinforced concrete for the interior and exterior supports—but also embodies the inner logic of the machine in its own right. Unlike architects of the past centuries, says Itagaki, major architects of the 1920s, such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, consciously turn away from existing norms of beauty, instead designing buildings in search of the most practiced use of material-based functionality under the banner of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.[19] Consequently, the beauty of their work, if it still exists, clearly points to a radically new concept of the arts that no longer privileges the genius and creative intervention of individual artists. As a specialist of Western art, Itagaki sees this as indicating an epistemological break in the historical development of the arts, insofar as it clearly rejects the hegemonic relation between the human subject and the non-human object. With this eye-opening discovery, Itagaki explores further examples of modern structures—factories, skyscrapers, iron bridges, airplanes, and battleships—to confirm their total devotion to functionalism.

It is in this historical context that film emerges as the most promising medium, with its unique potential to disseminate the premise of machine aesthetics to the mass public. For one, Itagaki argues, film is able to open the eyes of the general audience still unaware of the attractions of functional beauty by providing visually compelling illustrations of the saturation of modern machinery in the space of everyday life. A prime example here is Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (DE, 1927), which Itagaki praises as "depicting the social environment

of machine civilization in the most intrinsic way."[20] However, more crucial to Itagaki is the fact that the cinematic apparatus is itself an example of the machine par excellence. And just like his European contemporaries Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein, Itagaki's fascination with this optical device derives mostly from its ability to reveal hidden truths of the world, to recast our imperfect way of seeing:

> In the past, no one clearly understood the movement of the legs of a galloping horse. Only after it became possible to take photographs in fast motion did factual errors in the horse painting begin to disappear. Microscopic, telescopic, and high-speed photography all complemented the limited ability of the naked eye, so much so new photographic expressions [developed by Moholy-Nagy and others] have remodeled the ways we see objects. . . . Today, no one could deny the fact that a machine called "camera" possesses a more acute sensibility and subjectivity than the human eye does.[21]

If, as Itagaki argues, the camera's mechanical gaze has altered our epistemological relations with the world around us, the next step to follow is to interrogate how one can establish a new theory of aesthetics based on this non-human mode of visual perception. This is why in his subsequent essays, Itagaki draws special attention to Dziga Vertov and his famous concept of "kino-eye." When writing these essays in late 1929, however, Itagaki had yet to see any of Vertov's films. Moreover, while the introduction of Soviet montage theory to Japan had already started with Iwasaki Akira's 1928 translation of Semyon Timoshenko's *The Art of the Cinema: The Montage of Films*,[22] screenings of major Soviet films, including *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, SU, 1925) and *Mother* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, SU, 1926), were either banned or considerably delayed due to the government's censorship.[23] Despite such a limitation, Itagaki was still able to come across the growing fame of Vertov through his daily reading of art journals imported from Europe, and he even went on to translate the director's 1929 manifesto "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye" from German for the sake of Japanese readers.[24]

Though only eight pages long in its English translation, the manifesto clearly elucidates what Vertov was trying to accomplish with his cinematic experiments: "Kino-eye is the documentary cinematic decoding of both the visible world and that which is invisible to the naked eye"; it employs "every possible kind of shooting technique" as well as "every possible means in montage"; and by so doing, it ultimately aims for a radical reformation of the meaning of the phrase "I see" in both perceptual and epistemological senses.[25] Introducing these statements with his own translation and annotation, Itagaki sees in this director's work the birth of what he terms "machine realism":

In *Man with a Movie Camera* the world is observed through a "new eye." This new eye is an eye of the machine and it is more perceptive than our naked eyes. . . . When used by American capitalists, this mechanical eye is forced to follow run-of-the-mill stories or to look at actors decorated with heavy make-ups. Otherwise, it must be exploited as a sign of late-nineteenth-century notion of "naturalistic depiction," or of a more banal expression of "verisimilitude," along with the talkie or Technicolor. But here [in Vertov's work] the eye of the machine begins to establish "machine realism," as it is completely freed from all kinds of restraints.[26]

It is obvious that Itagaki proposes his concept of machine realism as a radical critique of naturalism, or any previous notions of realism developed in the past century. Above all, machine realism begins with the total negation of stylistic conventions that had generated the notion of verisimilitude based upon the alleged potency of the human sensory apparatus. In Itagaki's view, modern individuals became impotent in acquiring objective truths of the world on their own, and therefore he praises the movie camera's mechanical gaze as a form of superior agency, able to accurately grasp the elusive reality of the twentieth century in motion. Just as new discoveries in the natural world by modern physics are usually received with suspicion and disputes, the world captured by this mechanical eye would not instantly bring compelling reality effects to the eye of the general public. But for Itagaki, such a perceptual detour is a necessary step toward a theory of the new realism, insofar as it indicates an urgent epistemological demand for higher objectivity, a new way of knowing and depicting the world more suitable to accommodating people's changing perception of the real as such.

In addition, Itagaki also stresses that the advent of the eye of the machine would guide us to envision a more rational, democratic form of society. Contrary to the human gaze, whose presupposed consistency can easily be distorted by the individual's personal concerns or political standpoint, the camera's mechanical gaze is in principle indifferent to the hustle and bustle of human activities. In fact, as long as an object is laid before the camera with ample light and proper distance, its accurate shape and movements will be automatically rendered on the surface of the filmstrip. Such a displacement of human intervention—or rather, the discovery of the machine's own subjectivity—is the key to Itagaki's diagnosis of twentieth-century modernity. In his view, the machine is no longer a "destroyer" of old norms and forms of human labor; it now begins to serve as a "constructor" of new modalities of cultural production and consumption through its more progressive and universal working principles, namely, "simplicity, hygiene, systematization, inexpensiveness, durability, and abundance."[27]

Reading Itagaki's theorization of machine realism, one is confronted by the

question of how to assess his contribution to the history of non-Western film theory. Certainly, he was one of the rare and perceptive interpreters of Vertov and 1920s European avant-garde art movements in the non-Western context, and for this matter alone, his presence is instrumental in tracking the global reach and translatability of Western film and art theory. At the same time, one can also criticize Itagaki for his lack of originality, arguing that what he did in his writings was nothing more than a refabrication of ideas and knowledge imported from abroad. But before accepting this negative assessment, I want to highlight the necessity of critical reflection on the very nature of classical film theory—or the act of theorization—by treating it not as an accumulation of timeless ideas and definitions but as a set of living discourses mobilized to articulate specific—and thus inevitably local—instances and concerns in the varying experience of twentieth-century modernity as such. In other words, I argue that the originality of Itagaki's writing lies less in what he elaborated there than how he presented it to the readers of his own cultural context. Indeed, as the critic Hanada Kiyoteru wrote in the 1950s, Itagaki's presence as an advocate of machine aesthetics stimulated a number of heated disputes among Japanese intellectuals of the time,[28] making his theory live a different life that cannot be fully assessed by measurements of Western critical discourse alone. To better understand this geopolitical tension between the global and the local, we now have to turn our attention to another set of critical discourses that equally informed Itagaki's theory of machine realism.

Proletarian Realism and the Anxiety about the Kino-Eye

In its original context, Itagaki's concept of machine realism appeared as a critical response to the Marxist literary critic Kurahara Korehito's influential theory of proletarian realism. The correlation between the two is most visible in the title of Itagaki's third essay on the issue of machine aesthetics, "The Road to 'Machine Realism'" ("*Kikai no riarizumu*" *e no michi*), because it was named directly after Kurahara's seminal 1928 essay, "The Road to Proletarian Realism" (*Proretarian rearizumu e no michi*). Published in the inaugural issue of *Battle Flag* (*Senki*), official organ of the All Japan Federation of Proletarian Arts (*Zen Nihon Musansha Geijutsu Renmei*, usually called NAPF based on its Esperanto notation), Kurahara's essay served as a major theoretical framework for the burgeoning Japanese proletarian literature movement.[29] Neither contemporary readers nor literary historians could fail to recognize the impact of Kurahara's theorization of proletarian realism. As Mats Karlson points out, this piece was the first attempt "by a writer of the proletarian literary movement to address the problems of creative method in concrete terms," thus making Kurahara "the leading

theoretician of the movement and overall one of its most prominent figures."[30] Having emerged as a direct refutation of this epoch-making work, Itagaki's theory of machine realism inevitably became the subject of harsh criticism by advocates of proletarian realism. But before addressing this debate, it is necessary to see how Kurahara theorized proletarian realism.

Despite his overtly political standpoint, Kurahara had much in common with Itagaki, especially in their close proximity to the cultural center in the West. Born in 1902, Kurahara studied Russian literature at the Tokyo University of Foreign Languages. His passion for the object of his study—or more precisely, his growing interest in post-revolutionary Russia—was so profound that he moved to Moscow in 1925 and stayed there for two years as a foreign correspondent of the Japanese newspaper *Miyako shinbun*. Not surprisingly, Kurahara began his career by writing articles on the latest trends in the art of the Soviet Union. His 1927 article "The Recent Soviet Film World" (*Saikin no Sowēto eigakai*), for instance, was among the first to introduce Soviet films to Japan, providing detailed reviews of *Battleship Potemkin*, *Mother*, and *The Bay of Death* (Abram Room, SU, 1926).[31] Upon his return to Japan, Kurahara joined the proletarian literature movement and soon came into prominence by translating major texts by Georgi Plekhanov, Nikolai Bukharin, and Joseph Stalin.

A similarity between Itagaki and Kurahara can also be found in their methods and terminologies. In "The Road to Proletarian Realism" and other related essays, Kurahara, just like Itagaki, presents his concept of proletarian realism to be a radical critique of naturalism and other previous definitions of realism developed in the nineteenth century. Kurahara begins by admitting that French writers of the past century, such as Gustave Flaubert, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, and Guy de Maupassant, aimed to depict reality as objectively as possible. But the realism at work in their fiction, he contends, had a historical limitation deriving from their tendencies to see the world only through the perspective of bourgeois individualism.[32] Kurahara also points out that Émile Zola and followers of literary naturalism made recourse to Social Darwinism and hereditary determinism in their search for a higher objectivity. But this approach, says Kurahara, was still not objective enough to grasp a more profound truth of their society precisely because "while they [naturalists] imposed upon themselves the objectivity of natural scientists, they completely lacked the objectivity of social scientists."[33] Kurahara's criticism of nineteenth-century literary realism was most succinctly summarized in his reading of Zola's 1885 novel *Germinal*. While seeing this work's detailed illustration of a miner's strike as a significant step toward the socialization of literature, Kurahara is fully discontent with Zola's decision to depict that event "not from the perspective of the revolutionary proletariat but from the standpoint of a social reformist," in effect focusing on the failure of the strike and the miners'

subsequent disillusionment.[34] In the end, Kurahara concludes that *Germinal* remained nothing more than a passive mirror of the society: although it tells us the existence of social problems, it does not show how to solve them by radically changing the foundation of society as a whole.

Consequently, Kurahara defines his notion of proletarian realism as follows: First, in contrast to bourgeois realism's privatization of social problems, it aims to depict "all kinds of individual problems from a social perspective."[35] Second, unlike Zola and his followers' complicit treatment of the status quo, it offers a more dynamic and accurate interpretation of reality by foregrounding the uneven and exploitative nature of capitalist society. Third, and most importantly, Kurahara insists that this dual task of proletarian realism is accomplished only when writers begin to look at the world through what he calls "the eye of the proletarian vanguard." Like Itagaki's "eye of the machine," this new eye helps us reveal hidden truths of the world, but only through the lens of class struggle. Kurahara writes:

> First of all, a proletarian writer must acquire a clear class perspective. . . . To put it in the famous words of RAPP [The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers], he must see the world through the eye of the proletarian vanguard and depict what he finds there. Only by acquiring this perspective as well as by putting emphasis on it, can a proletarian writer become a true realist. At present, no one other than the militant proletariat—the proletarian vanguard—can see the world in its truth, its entirety, and its progress.[36]

The point here is clear. Assuming that the success of the Russian Revolution would inevitably lead to the total collapse of capitalist society at large, Kurahara finds it necessary to develop a new theory of realism that helps bring about this radical shift in the political reality of the twentieth century. As a result, the goal of proletarian realism becomes far from faithfully depicting reality as it is; instead, it aims for the construction of "a reality beyond reality" (*genjitsu ijō no genjitsu*) by turning literature into an effective means—or even a weapon—to realize the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Though similarly motivated to establish a new theory of realism, Itagaki found Kurahara's call for proletarian realism ideologically too selective and conceptually too dogmatic. For this reason, Itagaki devised his theory of machine realism to be as neutral as possible, purposely delineating a different utopian future in which people from different classes or cultural backgrounds can unite under the dictatorship of the machine. Not surprisingly, this highly political decision to depoliticize proletarian realism immediately came under attack from writers associated with the proletarian movement. Kurahara himself was first to

denounce machine realism from the proletarian perspective.[37] In the first place, Kurahara admitted that the saturation of modern machinery in everyday life also began to constitute a significant part of art and life of the proletariat. But he soon rejected Itagaki's assertion that the machine could serve as a superior agency of perception in lieu of human beings. "Machines," Kurahara wrote, "can never be the protagonist of proletarian art. The main characters of proletarian art are always *society* and *human beings*."[38] For advocates of proletarian realism, the machine should always remain a practical means of production and never be treated as the object of fetishism.

The purpose of Kurahara's counterargument was twofold: to confirm the subordination of the machine to humans and to highlight the social condition surrounding the daily use of the machine. Keeping these in mind, the proletarian writer Kobayashi Takiji made a more trenchant and substantive criticism of Itagaki in an article properly titled "On the 'Class Nature of the Machine'" ("*Kikai no kaikyūsei" ni tsuite*):

> Most of those interested in machine only speak about its "rationality" and "dynamics" but never clarify their own standpoints. I don't know how these people solved their own "romanticism" toward the machine. Insofar as they continue to ignore "class aspects," however, their realism remains a bourgeois or petit-bourgeois realism that is faithful only to the machine. . . . Only from the class perspective of the proletariat, can the machine reveal its true essence.[39]

It is clear that this condemnation faithfully follows Kurahara's theory of proletarian realism, arguing that the actual value of any artistic or intellectual activities derives less from the form or content of individual work than from each artist's and theorist's self-conscious commitment to class struggle. For Kobayashi and other practitioners of proletarian realism, there was of course no exception to this principle. But for Itagaki, this imperative call for the repoliticization of his concept of machine realism was nothing but misleading. As we have seen, Itagaki's main purpose was not to change the world according the political agenda devised by the Communist Party but to provide a more accurate and compelling picture of the present with the help of newly emergent discourses and practices of machine aesthetics. And if he was reluctant to adopt the critical vocabulary of the proletarian literature movement into his observation, it was precisely because the saturation of modern machinery was commonly found in both capitalist and socialist societies—as well as in both the West and the non-West—thereby forming a more universal symptom through which to diagnose the core elements and problems of twentieth-century modernity. In the hope of establishing a comprehensive analysis of this problematic, Itagaki remained open to having more

discussions with proletarian writers by inviting their contributions to his own journals. But the result was not as fruitful as he had anticipated, for his opponents never changed the focus of their accusations and continued to dismiss the real intention of his critical inquiries.

At the same time, the persistent rejection of machine realism by proletarian writers tellingly points to another core problem of modern experience: alienation. As most famously caricatured in Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times* (US), the increasing intervention of modern machinery into the space and experience of everyday life does not always promise a bright future; it could also lead to the crisis of the modern subject, a radical effacement of the harmonious unity between the body and the mind, or between individuals and their ancestral societies, by forcing it to go through the traumatic process of dislocation and disintegration.[40] Correspondingly, people in the twentieth century made enormous efforts to regain their purported totality, although these very attempts at recovery often involved more profound and destructive processes of dehumanization, as most clearly expressed in the case of fascism. It is thus not surprising that Itagaki's unabashed appraisal of the supremacy of the eye of the machine and correlated dismissal of the human sensory apparatus caused serious anxieties among his contemporary readers. As another critic also involved in the proletarian movement pointed out, Vertov—and his Japanese companion Itagaki—were nothing but "slave[s] of the cinema-machine" who had sold their souls in an effort "to see the world through the camera's *mechanical capabilities* alone." Conversely, any attempts to make film truly beneficial for revealing the true condition of capitalist society, he continued, must go through the process of rehumanization by recapturing the world with "the strictly objective gaze of the author."[41] Given these statements, it is possible to contend that what Kurahara and his followers aimed to achieve in their rebuttals was not merely to trumpet the victory of the proletariat over capitalists; they also tried to reassert the supremacy of man over machine in the articulation of what they considered to be real in their lived experience of twentieth-century modernity.

Conclusion

The debates between Itagaki and proletarian writers over the definitions of new realism abruptly came to an end around 1932. This was in part because the Japanese government violently suppressed leftist activities by this time, especially after the outbreak of the Manchurian Incident in 1931. Kurahara was arrested in 1932 and sentenced to seven years in prison; Kobayashi was cruelly tortured and murdered by the special police immediately after his capture in 1933. Another reason behind the discontinuation of the debate was Itagaki's own retreat from the issues of

machine aesthetics. As anticipated, this decision stemmed largely from Itagaki's frustration about his readers' inability to properly understand the main purpose of his project. Aside from harsh criticism from proletarian writers, the publishing industry expected him to write only about the superficial beauty of modern constructs, labeling him the leader of a new aesthetic faction called *Kikaiha*, or the Machinist School. That being said, Itagaki himself was not immune to the current of the times, as he also made a reactionary return to the old, human-centered notion of the arts in the course of the 1930s. As early as 1933, he looked back regretfully at his own obsession with Vertov and other European modernists as an "indiscretion of youth" and in turn sarcastically likened Japanese intellectuals' craze about new critical theories from abroad to children's yearning for new toys like yo-yos.[42] From this time on, Itagaki's stance shifted to commenting on film and other visual culture from the position of a conservative educator, using his vast knowledge about classical Western art for the purpose of mass enlightenment.[43]

Despite such an abrupt ending, Itagaki's writings on machine realism provide us with several instructive lessons for our investigation into the history of non-Western film theory. The first is that in order to assess the full potential of a minor and non-canonical theory like Itagaki's, it is necessary to situate it within both global and local discursive contexts. Itagaki, as we have seen, was one of the rare participants from Japan in the international debates on machine aesthetics, and his timely and reflective intervention helps establish a new point of reference in the global circulation of the theory and practice of 1920s European avant-garde art movements. However, equally important to consider is the impact his theory had on his own immediate readership. Despite negative reactions from proletarian writers, Itagaki's theoretical inquiry also generated further debates among his fellow Japanese theorists, such as Tosaka Jun, Nakai Masakazu, and Imamura Taihei, effectively encouraging them to further explore the ontological distinctiveness of the film medium and its enduring impact on our epistemological relations with the world in motion. And if we are in need of a more comprehensive picture of how theory has been associated with cinema in different historical and geopolitical contexts, such a local genealogy of thought is indispensable and must be given full critical attention.

The second consequence follows this dual consideration of the local and the global. Itagaki's theory of machine realism, especially when coupled and compared with Kurahara's proletarian realism, is capable of addressing larger problems that are still unsolved or at least contested in our critical discourse. Equally motivated by their desire to devise a new theory of realism to better articulate the intense and increasing shock of modernity in 1920s Japan, both Itagaki's and Kurahara's writings do not merely serve as empirical evidence to challenge Noël Burch's poststructuralist construction of an anti-realistic

and anti-theoretical Japan; they also provide us a new vantage point from which to revisit the troubled relationship between realism and modernism as critical concepts, a problem that scholars such as Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson have critically addressed over the past decades.[44] Obviously, this revelation exemplifies the necessity and timeliness of our ongoing excavation of non-Western film theory. But as I have stressed throughout this essay, the real utility of those minor theories is not always self-evident on their textual surface but is rather contingent upon our careful and thoughtful reconfiguration of the topography of non-Western critical writings on cinema in the broader context of twentieth-century cultural production.

Naoki Yamamoto is assistant professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has published on a variety of topics related to Japanese cinema and its international relationships, including the reception of early Hollywood cinema in 1910s Japan, wartime German-Japanese co-productions, and the work of the Japanese New Wave filmmaker Yoshida Kijū. He is currently completing a book manuscript titled *Realities That Matter: The Development of Realist Film Theory and Practice in Japan*.

NOTES

1. David Rodowick, "An Elegy for Theory," *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 94.

2. The recent revival of classical film theory is also inseparable from this concern. See, for instance, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010); Dudley Andrew, ed. (with Hervé Joubert-Laurencin), *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its After Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); and "A Return to Classical Film History?" special issue, *October* 148 (Spring 2014).

3. For a detailed account of this exploitative treatment, see Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "Japanese Cinema in Search of a Discipline," in *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 7–49.

4. Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, rev. and ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 13, 83.

5. Aaron Gerow, "Introduction: The Theory Complex," in "Decentering Theory: Reconsidering the History of Japanese Film Theory," ed. Aaron Gerow, special issue, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 22 (December 2010): 1.

6. Julianne Burton, "Marginal Cinema and Mainstream Critical Theory," *Screen* 26, nos. 3–4 (May–August 1985): 2–21; Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI, 1989), 111–32.

7. See, for instance, Julianne Burton, ed., *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); *Nagisa Oshima, Cinema, Censorship, and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima*, ed. Annett Michelson, trans. Dawn Lawson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993). Since the turn of the new century, scholars with postcolonial backgrounds have also begun to challenge the dominance of Western discourse in the constitution of film and media studies, but their approaches seem not to be freed from the logic of cultural particularism. See Saër Maty Bâ and Will Higbee, eds., *De-Westernizing Film Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

8. For more on this geopolitical dilemma of non-Western modernity, see Thomas Lamarre, "Introduction: Impacts of Modernities," in *Impacts of Modernities*, vol. 3 of *Traces*, ed. Thomas Lammare and Kang Nae-hui (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 1–35.

9. Itagaki Takao, *Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1929).

10. Itagaki Takao, "Gendai geijutsu kōsatsusha no shuki," *Shinkō geijutsu kenkyū* 1 (February 1931): 208–9.

11. For the historical significance of *shinkō shashin*, see Takeba Joe, "The Age of Modernism: From Visualization to Socialization," in *The History of Japanese Photography*, ed. Anne Wilkes Tucker, et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 142–83.

12. Horino Masao, *Kamera, me x Tetsu, kōsei* (Tokyo: Mokuseisha Shoin, 1932).

13. Itagaki Takao and Horino Masao, "Dai-Tokyo no seikaku," *Chuō kōron* 46, no. 10 (October 1931): Appendix 1–20. Moholy-Nagy's "Dynamic of the Metropolis" is reprinted in his *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 124–37.

14. Lu Xun seemed to have a keen interest in the writings of Itagaki and his colleagues at *Shinkō geijutsu*. In addition to Iwasaki's article, Lu Xun also translated Itagaki's 1927 monograph *Minzokuteki shikisai o shu to suru kindai bijutsushi chōron* (Tokyo: Daitōkaku, 1927) under the title *Jindai meishushi chao lun: yi "minzu di secai" weizhu de* (Shanghai: Beixin shuju, 1929).

15. "Hakkan no ji," *Shinkō geijutsu kenkyū* 1 (February 1931), quoted in Makino Mamoru, "*Shinkō geijutsu to Shinkō geijutsu kenkyū* no jidai," in *Shinkō Geijutsu*, vol. 3 of *Nihon modanizumu no kōryū*, ed. Makino Mamoru. (Tokyo: Yumani shobō, 1990), 163.

16. Hirano Ken, *Shōwa bungakushi* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1963).

17. Itagaki Takao, "Kikai bunmei to gendai bijutsu," *Shisō* 83 (April 1929), reprinted in Itagaki, *Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū*, 40–41.

18. Quoted in Itagaki, "Kikai bunmei to gendai bijutsu," 44. This famous dictum was first introduced in Le Corbusier's 1923 book *Vers une architecture* (Paris: G. Cres). This book's first Japanese translation appeared in 1929, under the title *Kenchiku geijutsu e*, trans. Miyazaki Kenzō (Tokyo: Kōseisha Shobō).

19. Itagaki, "Kikai bunmei to gendai bijutsu," 44–50.

20. Ibid., 63. By contrast, Itagaki refers to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (DE, 1927) as an example of "machine romanticism" in the same article.

21. Itagaki Takao, "Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū," *Shisō* 88 (September 1929), reprinted in his *Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū*, 97–98.

22. In addition to this book, nearly all the major texts by Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein were translated into Japanese by the mid-1930s. For more on the Japanese reception of Soviet montage theory, see my "Montage Theory in Japan," in *The Japanese Cinema Book*, ed. Hideaki Fujiki and Alastair Phillips (London: BFI, forthcoming).

23. Soviet films officially released in prewar Japan include *Storm over Asia* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, SU, 1928), *In Spring* (Mikhail Kaufman, SU, 1929), *The General Line* a.k.a. *Old and New* (Grigori Aleksandrov, Sergei Eisenstein, SU, 1929), *Turksib* (Victor A. Turin, SU, 1929), and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, SU, 1929).

24. According to Itagaki, the German translation of Vertov's manifesto appeared in the July 1929 issue of the German journal *Die Form*. Itagaki also obtained information about Vertov from other German journals, such as *Das Kunstblatt* and *Das neue Frankfurt*.

25. Dziga Vertov, "From Kino-Eye to Radio-eye," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 87–88.

26. Itagaki Takao, "'Kikai no riarizumu' e no michi," *Asahi shinbun*, September 10, 1929, reprinted in his *Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū*, 150.

27. Itagaki, "Kikai to geijutsu to no kōryū," 73.

28. Hanada Kiyoteru, "Kikai to bara," in *Avangyarudo geijutsu* (1954; reprint, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1994), 194.

29. For a historical account of the proletarian literature movement in Japan, see Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 595–628.

30. Mats Karlson, "Kurahara Korehito's Road to Proletarian Realism," *Japan Review* 20 (2008): 236, 231.

31. Kurahara Korehito, "Saikin no Sowēto eigakai (1)," *Kinema junpō* 254 (March 1, 1927): 24; "Saikin no Sowēto eigakai (2)," *Kinema junpō* 257 (April 1, 1927): 30.

32. Kurahara Korehito, "Puroretaria rearizumu e no michi," *Senki* (May 1928), reprinted in *Kurahara Korehito shū*, vol. 4 of *Nihon puroretaria bungaku hyōronshū* (Tokyo: Shin Nihon Shuppansha, 1990), 118.

33. Ibid., 118.

34. Ibid., 119.

35. Ibid., 122.

36. Ibid., 122–23.

37. Kurahara Korehito, "Shin-geijutsu keishiki no tankyū e: Puroretaria geijutsu tōmen no mondai ni tsuite," *Kaizō* (December 1929), reprinted in *Kurahara Korehito shū*, 235–36.

38. Ibid., 237.

39. Kobayashi Takiji, "'Kikai no kaikyūsei' ni tsuite," *Shin-kikaiha* (March 1930), reprinted in *Kōki puroretaria bungaku hyōronshū* 2, vol. 7 of *Nihon Puroretaria bungaku hyōronshū* (Tokyo: Shin Nihon Shuppansha, 1990), 68–69.

40. My argument here is based on Lukács's reference to this film as an example of "the ordinary

man's feeling of isolation against the context of the machinery and apparatus of modern capitalism." Georg Lukács, "'Film,'" in *Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema: A Study of Georg Lukács' Writing on Film, 1913–71*, ed. and trans. Ian Aitken (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 201.

41. Tomioka Shō, "Tōkī geijutsu no rearizumu e no michi," *Eiga hyōron* 14.5 (May 1933): 69, 73. Tomioka's reference to Itagaki and Kurahara is clearly seen in the title of this article, which can be translated as "The Road to Realism in Talkie Art." Tomioka believes this rehumanizing process would be possible only with the advent of the talkie, as this new technology enables filmmakers to speak directly of their own vision of the world through dialogues.

42. Itagaki Takao, "Yōyō to geijutsuron," in *Kansō no gangu* (Tokyo: Ōhata Shoten, 1933), 7–8.

43. For Itagaki's later career, see Iwamoto Kenji, "Kikai bunmei to eiga kyōiku," in *Itagaki Takao: Kurashikku to modan*, ed. Igarashi Toshiharu (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2010), 15–42.

44. Raymond Williams, "When Was Modernism?" *New Left Review* I/175 (May-June 1989): 48–52; Fredric Jameson, "Existence of Italy," in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 155–230.