The notion of “global cinema” has been changing dramatically in the last two decades due to the increasing ubiquity of digital technology. The cinematic event has been steadily relocated from the theater to the home, and the act of viewing has thus also been transformed from a collective experience to an individual one. Moreover, the once dominant flow of movie screen culture, historically centered in Hollywood, has been dispersed with the diversity of cinematic commodities such as DVDs or Blu-ray Disc as well as Internet-enabled distribution. The directions of that cultural flow have become more variegated and even reversed, as regional genres such as anime and J-horror (Japanese horror films) gain momentum across global markets. While genre films have often been considered as alternative cinema or B movies and are usually neglected by international festivals and prestigious film awards, regional genres have become increasingly popular in contemporary Japan and elsewhere.

*Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age* investigates how the new media, primarily computer and digital technologies, have impacted the flow of cinema culture, especially in the global commodification of such regional genre films. Within these technological advances and the new cinematic flow, contemporary cinemas often express the transnational as an object of desire, a desire
that is nonetheless inseparable from national identity. Most of the films that succeed in the global market manage to cross the boundaries between cultural particularity and universality. For example, a frequent plot device in J-horror is ghostly visitations through videotapes, cell phones, or computers. These information technologies reproduce the individual scale of the spectator’s local, small-screen experience, but their now ubiquitous presence resonates with the contemporary global audience. This book attempts to unravel Japan’s conflicting desires toward the transnational stages of culture, marketing, and viewership, which are in conspicuous play in regional film genres. If the transnational is defined as “the global forces that link people or institutions across nations,” many recent Japanese films ought to be considered as transnational.¹ And, indeed, many Japanese films are produced with multinational financing (The Grudge, 2004, Shimizu Takashi, Japan/United States/Germany), and some use only the Korean language despite the fact that the majority of the cast is Japanese (The Hotel Venus, 2004, Takahata Hideta). Some are shot entirely abroad, such as in the United States (Brother, 2000, Kitano Takeshi) or in Thailand (Last Life in the Universe, 2003, and Invisible Waves, 2006, both directed by Pen-Ek Ratanaruang). But I find myself asking, What makes these films transnational? In other words, do the logistics of those films’ productions add up to a transnational identity? Might their multinational elements—such as the address to a diasporic Korean ethnic subject in the film Blood and Bones (Chi to hone, 2004, Sai Yoichi)—be better understood within the particular national framework of Japanese exceptionalism among Asian countries, as suggested in Koichi Iwabuchi’s work on Japanese transnationalism? Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age explores the strategic rationale behind the transnational cinema in both the film industry and recent critical paradigms.

**Questioning Transnationalism**

Iwabuchi’s work, Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism, is central to my book’s conceptual groundwork. The significance of his work is his perception that Japanese popular culture’s encounters with other Asian countries in the 1990s have reconfigured the flow of global culture away from the normative center in “the West” or America toward Asia.² Iwabuchi also depicts the state of the mediascape between Asian nations by deploying the marketing term “glocalization,” referring to “a global strategy, which does not seek to impose a standard product or image, but instead is tailored to the demands of the local market.”³ Through such examples as the Taiwanese reception of Japanese television dramas and the Japanese
obsession with the Singaporean singer Dick Lee or Hong Kong stars such as Jacky Cheung, Andy Lau, Kaneshiro Takeshi, and the late Leslie Cheung, Iwabuchi analyzes how various Asian nations’ popular culture negotiates the national divide between Japan and other Asian countries. In those analyses, Iwabuchi underscores that “hybridization” of modern Japan’s national identity is not imagined simply within the dichotomous relation of “the West” and Japan but in the historically sustained “asymmetrical totalizing triad between ‘Asia,’ ‘the West,’ and ‘Japan.’” My own work, *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*, builds on the concept of a recentered mediascape in global culture. My focus is on the negotiations in the name of “glocalization,” especially in the production, distribution, consumption, and representations of Japanese popular cinema from the 1990s through the 2000s.

While my book shares those aspects with *Recentering Globalization*, it also presents critical differences, which stem from the fact that we view “the transnational” in different ways. Iwabuchi situates the recent emergence of Japan’s transnational culture against the historical backdrop of Japanese pan-Asianism, a continuity stretching across prewar nationalism to the economic expansion in the 1970s to the current era of late capitalism. Since the late 1980s, various social facts—such as the collapse of the bubble economy in Japan, the worldwide reconstruction of the political and economic order after the end of the Cold War, and the radical development in Asian countries’ economies—led Japanese culture to pursue reconciliation with the East in the 1990s. With this historical viewpoint, he describes the new cultural condition and defines “transnational” as a cultural flow by adopting the social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz’s idea of the transnational and the social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s concept of “disjuncture” in the global cultural economy. Iwabuchi writes, “The intricacy and disjunctiveness of emerging intra-Asian popular cultural flows under globalizing forces are better expressed by the term *transnational*, as opposed to *international* or *global*, for a variety of reasons. . . . The term *transnational* is ‘more humble, and often a more adequate label for phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution’ than the term global, which sounds too all-inclusive and decontextualized.” The critical point in his definition of “transnational” is that he views it as a *cultural flow* of information and images. For Iwabuchi, this cultural phenomenon is understood as the Japanese popular culture’s *encounter* or *reencounter* with other Asian countries, after the cultural introversion of the postwar period. Where he and I part company is that I see greater evidence of discontinuity in transnational trends. In Iwabuchi’s view, national culture remains largely intact despite its flow across borders and temporalities. On the contrary, I conceive the transnational as the negation of the national, as
one can see in the regular usage of political and economic acronyms such as NGO (nongovernmental organization) or TNC (transnational corporation).

I think the challenge that the transnational poses vis-à-vis culture is best illustrated in the increasing prevalence of such entities as NGOs and TNCs. Let us consider how the term “TNC” is defined in general. If we accept the definition of TNC by economists Christopher A. Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal, who have long been asserting the primacy of the TNC since the early 1990s, there are three central aspects that are usually at play. First, the TNC pursues economic efficiency or productivity at the global level. It not only depends on the profit of international trades but generates profit directly in various nations or regions. Second, the TNC has no clear division between so-called head offices and branches in sharing business knowledge and organizational infrastructure. In other words, the TNC avoids treating “branches” simply as passive objects for investment. Finally, the TNC has flexibility in its business strategy to negotiate effectively and deal with various regional needs. What is new is the indeterminability of cultural subjects, as the organizing principal of the nation is diminished in the transnational flow of capital. So I differ from Iwabuchi’s view that since culture has always been migratory, it necessarily follows that transnationalism has historical continuity. I do not necessarily believe that the nation ceases to be operative, figuratively and literally. This book explores new possibilities of viewing culture by foregrounding the role of transnationalism in current cinema and image media, such as the multiplicity of new distribution channels from digital technology.

The confusion over “the transnational” is rather conspicuous in various academic writings, such as work on immigration in social science. While sociologists Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald indicate that “connectivity” between source, a migrating subject, and his or her destination points is an inherent aspect of the migration phenomenon, they rouse our attention to “recent social scientists [who] are looking for new ways to think about the connections between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ as evidenced by the interest in the many things called transnational.” Waldinger and Fitzgerald cast dual objections toward the current tendency among social scientists: First, many of them dichotomize the “transnational” experience from “assimilation”; and second, they use the term “transnational” in opposition to “those by-products of globalization denoted by the concept of ‘transnational civil society’ and its related manifestations.” Waldinger and Fitzgerald view the treatment of assimilation and transnationalism as polar opposites to be fundamentally mistaken. The problem originates in the double meanings of the terms. While “assimilation” is in general defined as the reduction of ethnic difference within a nation-state, it can also be considered as “the making of difference between
national peoples.”¹¹ In other words, they view the sociology of assimilation as an ideology that obscures the state’s coercive forces to sustain a nation-state society by excluding outsiders. Likewise, they explicate the contradiction regarding transnationalism as follows: “The relevant forms of social action [for the conventional usage of transnationalism] do not transcend difference but rather are directed entirely toward specific places or groups.”¹²

This formative sociological dichotomy has existed for much longer than one might think. The term “transnationalism” allegedly originated from Randolph Bourne, a progressive writer and public intellectual in the 1910s. Following the philosopher Horace Kallen’s 1915 article, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot” and its assertion of multiculturalism, Bourne published his own article in *The Atlantic Monthly* on February 25, 1916, titled “Trans-National America.”¹³ In the article, Bourne argued that the United States should abandon Anglo-Saxonism, a policy that forces various immigrants to assimilate to the dominant Anglo-American culture, and instead accommodate immigrant cultures into a “cosmopolitan America.” Like Kallen, Bourne rejects the theory of “a melting pot” and declares that immigrants from around the world living in the United States neither completely disconnect themselves from their own cultures and mother tongues nor monolithically assimilate in the dominant Anglophone culture. He also asserts that viewing the particular assimilation as “Americanization” is simply false. Bourne promotes “trans-national spirit” as an alternative concept, and indicates that the new U.S. direction must be led by the new cosmopolitan ideal. He writes: “The foreign cultures have not been melted down or run together, made into some homogeneous Americanism, but have remained distinct but cooperating to the greater glory and benefit, not only of themselves but of all the native ‘Americanism’ around them.”¹⁴ We must pay attention, however, to his discourse’s temporal and spatial specificity, namely that it was published just before the U.S. decision to enter World War I, which ended a long period of isolationism supported by the Monroe Doctrine. Neither of the terms “transnational” nor “transnationalism” introduced in his article transcends the actual notion of nation or nationality, and they are rather presented as ideal concepts for the formation of the nation-state, especially in the United States.

In *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*, I avoid viewing the historically ambiguous term “transnational” as a self-evident concept and instead analyze how it has been used in contemporary cinematic discourses. If the new global cultural economy can be seen as “a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models”¹⁵ as Appadurai indicates, what kinds of meaning accrue from the so-called transnational cinema in such a disjunctive economy? And if the new
cultural economy is inseparable from historicity, cultural unevenness, various localities, and people’s “imagined world,”16 how do identity politics function behind such a contradictory cultural subject as Japanese cinema, pronounced as transnational? Likewise toward the transnational itself, this book also avoids viewing “Japanese cinema” as a priori connected with Japan, the Japanese, or Japanese culture, or even equating it with films made in Japan, but rather critically analyzes how the cinema is discursively constructed and framed. The difficulty of discussing the notion of cinema and other visual media in the age of cultural globalization is rooted in the inherent contradiction of such fundamental things as “culture.” As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto writes, “the notion of culture, which, on one hand, functions as code word for the national and, on the other, conceals the production of unevenness.”17

From this perspective, we might consider how the notion of transnationalism or transnational culture may be problematic as reified depictions of cultural neutrality and statelessness. Iwabuchi offers the expression “culturally odorless”18 in place of the term “culturally neutral,” which was coined by the economists Colin Hoskins and Rolf Mirus for explaining the characteristic of Japanese consumer technologies.19 Then, Iwabuchi suggests that the expression is equivalent to “mukokuseki (stateless),”20 elucidating it as follows: “The characters of Japanese animation and computer games for the most part do not look ‘Japanese.’ Such non-Japaneseness is called mukokuseki, literally meaning ‘something or someone lacking any nationality,’ but also implying the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics or a context, which does not imprint a particular culture or country with these features.”21 Iwabuchi notes that “while ‘odor,’ or ‘smell,’ seems to be a natural phenomenon, the perceived attraction of any particular odor is, in fact, closely associated with the historical and social construction of various kinds of hierarchies such as class, ethnicity, and gender.”22 If, as he explains, the usage of “odor” is culturally specific in Japan, how does it function in the global cultural system, since the term has an explicit connotation only working in the Japanese cultural sphere? For that matter, mukokuseki in particular carries rather unique cultural associations with the nation and the Other—associations that are historically opposed to transnationalism.

As Iwabuchi mentions, the term mukokuseki was first used in the early 1960s as a new film genre, Nikkatsu mukokuseki action.23 As the oldest film studio, Nikkatsu was established by integrating four smaller film companies in 1912, which later suspended production as the distribution company Daiei absorbed Nikkatsu under the wartime governmental policy in 1942. It was not until 1954 that Nikkatsu finally resumed film production. Due to the Five-Company Agreement (gosha-kyotei)—a corporate trust consisting
of Shochiku, Toho, Daiei, Shin-Toho, and Toei—Nikkatsu faced difficulties enticing popular stars from those companies. Consequently, it had to discover and promote new faces, such as the stars of the so-called Nikkatsu Diamond Line: Ishihara Yujiro, Kobayashi Akira, Akagi Kei’ichiro, Wada Koji, among others. Nikkatsu first advanced an action film genre with those male stars from the late 1950s, and the term *mukokuseki* was popularized with some series in the action genre—the *wataridori* series (literally a “migratory bird,” but it was known as “out-of-towner” series, 1959–1961) and the *nagaremono* series (drifter series, 1960–1961), in which Kobayashi Akira took the leading role. Going by the nickname of Maitogai (mighty guy), Kobayashi’s two film series were enormously popular and distributed to Nikkatsu theaters at the rate of one a month. The films embraced many foreign icons associated with American Westerns and a burgeoning fad in collecting gun replicas, likely results of being subjected to postwar American culture. Kobayashi often appeared on horseback or in a horse-drawn carriage with a ten-gallon hat and a gun, which was an absurd cultural mismatch since the films were typically set in Japan. While the diegetic space was often located in the rustic Japanese countryside, the films offered elaborately staged cabaret sequences with top-class dancers displaying Hollywood-style choreography.

Explaining the action genre in the history of Japanese cinema, the contemporary film critic Kishi Matsuo wrote a blistering critique in a 1961 article:

> Recent Nikkatsu films have no shame. They present a Western-like town in a wasteland, which is somewhere in Japan. Kobayashi Akira, Shihido Jo, and Nitani Hideaki act as drifters [*nagare-mono*], out-of-towners [*wataridori*], good-for-nothing fellows [*rokudenshiyaro*], or killers [*koroshiya*], and shoot their guns openly in broad daylight as they laugh at the current hopeless police system. This genre’s recent popularity will likely continue despite critics denigrating them as “*mukokuseki* films.”

What emerges from Kishi’s critical discourse is that the term *mukokuseki* was not a marketing strategy coined by the production studios or distributors but rather a term spread through the pages of film criticism at that time. Another significant aspect is that contemporary audiences did not receive those films as literally *mukokuseki* but accepted the estranged scenery as part of Japan, thereby connecting the expression to the mismatched quality in the narrative space of the films.

The mismatch in the *mukokuseki* films—of statelessness, but at once belonging to Japan—becomes clear by carefully examining the actual film
series. There are nine films in the *wataridori* series, from *The Rambling Guitarist* (*Gita o motta wataridori*, 1959) to *The Guitarist, Returning Home* (*Wataridori kokyo e kaeru*, 1962). The “mighty-guy” Kobayashi goes abroad only once—to Bangkok and Hong Kong in *The Guitarist, Plowing the Waves* (*Hatou o koeru wataridori*, 1961)—and instead travels all of Japan from Hakodate in the north to Miyazaki Prefecture in the south. The geographical mapping in the film series reveals the social and cultural ideology of that era—a time of financial restrictions and when the government regulated overseas travel. It was extremely difficult for the Japanese to travel abroad in the 1950s and early 1960s. On April 1, 1963, one year after the end of Kobayashi’s two series, the Japanese government for the first time allowed Japanese businessmen to travel strictly for business purposes, and then in 1964 the government officially gave all citizens permission to go abroad as tourists. However, due to the low exchange rate of the Japanese yen and the expensive airline tickets in the 1960s, the number of tourists abroad did not start to increase until the 1970s, when the yen’s value soared. Japanese consumers’ longing toward traveling abroad in the 1950s and 1960s was indeed reified into the popular culture in general, not only cinema. The long-lasting television program, *Kaoru Kanetaka’s “World around Us”* (*Kanetaka Kaoru sekai no tabi*, KTR/TBS, December 13, 1959, to September 30, 1990) lured viewers with this longing away from Nikkatsu *mukokuseki* action films. Journalist Kanetaka, fluent in English, served as producer, director, and reporter for the program and visited a number of countries. Although this television program actually revealed many areas abroad, which differed significantly from the *mukokuseki* films simulating “foreignness” in Japan, both became extremely successful products in 1960s’ Japanese popular culture. Both texts fully shared the contemporary viewers’ desire and provided, in a way, a representation of the encounter between the desired “foreignness” and the Japanese.

The historical context of post-occupation’s Japan is indispensable for understanding the *mukokuseki* films, especially its connection with “America” as image through television. Sociologist Yoshimi Shun’ya asserts that a duality of “Americas” has been sustained since post-occupation Japan. He writes,

In the late 1950s, the dual “Americas” gradually appeared in Japan. The one is “America” as image, introduced and consumed via media, and the imaged “America” put historical scenery of the occupation period such as military bases and brothels for GIs as its background. The other is “America” as “violence.” The association with violence is reified in the actual military bases, which have been exposed to censure due to widespread resentment among Japanese
towards the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (1960). While those dual “Americas” are indeed two sides of the same coin, they were separated during the period of Japan’s economic miracle in the 1960s and 1970s, so that they now sustain each imaginary reality as if they are not connected with each other at all.²⁶

Yoshimi also highlights that the introduction of television played a crucial role in mediating the imaged version of “America.” When Japanese television culture began in 1953, with the start of NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai, Japan Broadcasting Corporation), programs were limited to news and sports such as sumo, pro-wrestling matches, and baseball games. Although the television set itself was still quite expensive for a regular household in the 1950s, viewership finally reached saturation levels with the televised wedding of Crown Prince Akihito in 1959 (over 2 million televisions were sold by that year).²⁷ Many U.S. television drama series were adapted in the formative period of Japanese television, especially Western drama series such as *Buffalo Bill Jr.* (U.S. in 1955; Japan NTV in 1957), *Laramie* (U.S. NBC in 1959–1963; Japan NET in 1960–1963), and *Rawhide* (U.S. CBS in 1959–1965; Japan NET in 1959–1965). In the late 1950s, while the memory of the U.S. occupation had been gradually withering in Japan, the Japanese nonetheless kept their relationship with America through consuming its televised images. In other words, it can be argued that these televised American images ignited the boom of Nikkatsu *mukokuseki* films.²⁸

Let us return to the terms “culturally odorless” and “*mukokuseki,*” which Iwabuchi uses to situate the transnational character of the 1990s Japanese popular culture. As we historically contextualize *mukokuseki,* it reveals that the term does not signify the erasure of racial or ethnic markings, nor does it originate as a business strategy to depict characters without distinct Asian features in anime.²⁹ I find a similar discrepancy between the term “culturally odorless” and Iwabuchi’s rationale toward it. For instance, the recently popular “Lohas (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability) cinema” in Japan has served as a marketing term for specifically targeted consumers who are alert to health and environmental issues. The films link those issues to travel and transnational culture for a mostly female audience demographic in Japan. A number of films, such as *Kamome Diner* (*Kamome shokudo*, 2006, Ogigami Naoko), *Glasses* (*Megane*, 2007, Ogigami Naoko), *Pool* (*Puru*, 2009, Omori Mika), and *Honokaa Boy* (*Honokaa boi*, 2009, dir. Sanada Atsuhi), foreground the concept of Lohas, which was introduced in the mid-2000s via self-help discourses in television and print media. While Ogigami’s *Kamome Diner* captures Japanese women (Kobayashi Satomi, Katagiri Hairi, and Motai
Masako) opening their own restaurant in Helsinki, Finland, and serving Japanese “soul food” rice balls (onigiri), another Ogigami film, Glasses, depicts the transformation of a woman's state of mind from fatigue with her own life in Tokyo to building her self-confidence through her stay at a beach inn, Hamada, on a remote southern island (shot in Yoronjima, Kagoshima Prefecture, but unrevealed in the film). In Pool, the director Omori recasts many of the same actors from Ogigami's films and depicts the quiet life of the Japanese migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The actress Kobayashi Satomi takes a leading role in the film as an owner of a chic and well-maintained inn with a small swimming pool. The location of the film Honokaa Boy is in the actual area of the Hawaiian Islands: Honoka‘a, a town on the island of Hawai‘i with only about two thousand residents, a place where many Japanese immigrated and still live. The film portrays a heartwarming relationship between the elderly Japanese “Bee” (Baisho Chieko) and a newly arrived youth Leo (Okada Masaki), working as an assistant projectionist, and depicts how he gradually grows up, full of affection among Honoka‘a’s people. Those films' casts are almost all Japanese, can speak foreign languages fluently (Finnish in Kamome, Thai in Pool, and English in Honokaa), and have no resemblance to longstanding Japanese stereotypes: They carry no expensive cameras; they never bow; and most eschew wearing glasses (though the cast in Glasses is the exception). So, while the Lohas films might emphasize the Japanese characters’ assimilation, differences from the Others in their foreign countries are diminished. In other words, one may view this assimilation as a reified representation of cultural odorlessness. This assimilation in Lohas and mukokuseki cinemas, however, shares the contemporary cultural “synesthesia,”30 borrowing Appadurai’s term, which derives from the glocal strategy, targeted at local markets and influenced by the ideology of global consumer culture.

Iwabuchi offers the paradigm shift in theory as one of the larger contexts for those terms and Japan’s transnationalism, more specifically citing the swing from criticism on Americanization or cultural imperialism to cultural globalization.31 In Recentering Globalization, Iwabuchi literally succeeds in presenting a recentered formation of culture’s circulations by examining Japanese media culture in East/Southeast Asian countries and vice versa, in which Western or American culture is indeed no longer the driving force. While he highlights the spread of Japanese popular culture in the Asian region, tracing it to a resurgence of expansionist nationalism in Japan’s desire to reconnect with Asia economically, he completely suppresses the culture’s connection with the West or more specifically the United States. As we can see in the cases of Lohas and mukokuseki films, however, the relation between cinema and cultural syaesthesia is neither monolithic nor stationary. The mukokuseki
films, on the one hand, present an imagined spatial formation, one following closely the pattern of Kobayashi Akira’s *ethnoscape*, to borrow Appadurai’s terminology for globalization, the migratory figure moving from the center (the capital Tokyo) to the periphery (domestic frontier towns). The Lohas films, on the other hand, represent global mapping from a reference point centered in Japan, in which those Japanese travelers go to areas that are remote from the political and financial centers or take up residence in “foreign” welfare states. The difference in their scales of movement is influenced by the dissimilar *financescape* of each historical period (the yen had weakened against the dollar in the 1950s and 1960s, and it became stronger in the 1980s). If we focus on the *ideoscape* in each cinema, however, we realize that Iwabuchi’s idea of expansionist nationalism in Japan inspiring the connection with Asia is simply a part of cultural multiplicity, and the idea conceals the ever-present unevenness in a culture’s production and consumption.

For instance, the *mukokuseki* films share the ideoscape of Western cowboys in the American television programs from the 1950s and 1960s. Both film historians Watanabe Takenobu and Itakura Fumiaki indicate the significance of mythic individualism in those Nikkatsu *mukokuseki* action films, and that the genre’s characteristic becomes more visible through comparing it with the subsequent genre *yakuza* films (*ninkyo eiga*), which were mainly produced in the 1960s and 1970s at Toei studios. Although the two film genres deploy common themes and icons, such as male bonding, revenge, and endless killings with guns and swords, the hero’s outlook on life and death or his desire toward assimilation within his own community in Toei *ninkyo* films—a hero often seeks redemption with his group by sacrificing his own life at the end—differs from the ethos of individualism or rootlessness in *mukokuseki* action films.

In the case of Lohas cinema, it is much easier to reveal the cinema’s *ideoscape*, which often determines a sense of value in a diegetic space. As *The New York Times*’ article explains, the term was coined in the early 2000s as a marketing brand to encapsulate consumers with keen interests in health and environmental issues. In her 2003 article amusingly titled “Business: They Care about the World (and They Shop, Too),” *The New York Times*’ correspondent Amy Cortese writes, “The name [Lohas] was coined a few years ago by marketers trying to define what they regarded as a growing opportunity for products and services that appeal to a certain type of consumer. It may be the biggest market you have never heard of, encompassing things like organic foods, energy-efficient appliances and solar panels as well as alternative medicine, yoga tapes and eco-tourism.”  

In other words, the core concept of the Lohas cinema is the globally disseminated marketing term
allegedly originating from the United States. The crucial point here is that there is a “disjunctive” connection, again borrowing Appadurai’s term, between the ethnoscape, depicted on the representational level in the films, and the ideoscape, expressed as a sense of value in the narrative space.

If indeed there was a huge shift in how to view culture in the 1990s as Iwabuchi has stated, it was not simply in the swing from criticism on cultural imperialism to cultural globalization or from American-centered global culture to one consisting of multiple centers and cultures. Rather the notion of culture itself has transformed through continuous shifts in layered theoretical paradigms. The shift in theoretical paradigms has continued since the “linguistic turn” and the “interpretive turn” in the 1960s and 1970s, and the sweeping political and economic changes of the late 1980s, such as the collapse of Cold War formations and the rise of late capitalism, have spurred the theoretical transformation to something new, suitable to a social condition of global economy and culture, or neo-nationalism set against global integration. This new theoretical formation, expressed as a “cultural turn,” has been gradually introduced since the late 1990s. My goal in Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age is to investigate how Japanese cinema has been reconstructed in this continuously transforming, multifaceted theoretical paradigm, along with the dramatic change in the concept of culture itself. In other words, I view Japanese cinema as a discursively constructed cultural formation. My questions are how has it functioned in the ebb and flow of global culture and what kinds of meanings has it been making? In order to wrestle with these questions, I have chosen three indispensable contexts of the Japanese cinema: industry in the post-studio era, technological transformation, and the cultural imagination of the “transnational,” which will be discussed in the following sections.

**CHANGING TOPOGRAPHY IN THE POST-STUDIO ERA**

The year 1997 was celebrated as a turning point for the Japanese film industry. Kitano Takeshi’s *Hana-Bi* (1997) won the Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival, Kawase Naomi’s *Suzaku* (*Moe no suzaku*, 1997) received the Golden Camera Award at Cannes, and Miyazaki Hayao’s *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke hime*, 1997) broke domestic box-office records by grossing nearly 19 billion Japanese yen, approximately U.S.$182 million. Following these successes, a number of popular magazines rather hastily proclaimed a Japanese cinematic “Renaissance.” Celebrating the revitalized cinema, the Japanese edition of *Newsweek*, for instance, devoted its front cover to rising filmmaker Iwai Shunji. *Studio Voice* had a special feature on “Japanese cinema’s legend,” which begins with the line, “Japanese cinema is not dead
yet.”36 Brutus focused on the success of Kitano’s Hana-Bi, and the magazine’s cover announced, “Got it! The Venice Film Festival Grand Prix. Only the Japanese don’t value the Japanese cinema.”37 Eureka, in a special issue on Japanese cinema, included a long discussion between the filmmaker Aoyama Shinji and the poet and film critic Inagawa Masato on Japanese cinema’s latest comeback and on its ability to endure.38 After the long-term economic recession of the 1990s, film critics and audiences viewed the cinema’s striking box-office increase in 1997 (¥32.6 billion from ¥23 billion in 1996) as just short of a miracle.39

The cinema’s resurgence, however, had less to do with the contributions of talented auteurist directors than with structural changes that were already underway in the film industry, starting in the late 1980s. Although the Japanese film industry had been declining since the early 1960s, the end of “program-picture” production further accelerated the decline in the 1980s.40 The studio system of production with star actors under exclusive contract and the steady output of films for distribution to studio-franchised movie theaters started collapsing in the 1970s with the downturn of moviegoing, and the systematic production in the industry almost disappeared during the 1980s. At the end of the 1980s, major studios such as Shochiku, Toho, and Toei would rarely produce their own films, acting largely as distributors for films created by small production companies.41 As film critic Abe Casio points out, the decline of studio production has been the most influential factor for the contemporary cinema, especially since the end of Nikkatsu’s Roman Porn genre (a soft-core porn genre since 1971) in 1989, the last program pictures to follow the pattern of studio production from the heyday of the film industry.42

Thus in real terms, the success in 1997 notwithstanding, productions by the major Japanese studios have been steadily decreasing, with some companies even selling off their studio properties (e.g., Shochiku sold its studios in 1999 and Nikkatsu in 2000). Historically, the Japanese film industry had maintained its vertical distribution structure (i.e., each studio distributes its films to its own movie theaters) and block-booking system (local theaters are contracted to screen only a single studio’s films). Toho and Shochiku are the best examples of this case, having kept their theaters since the prewar period and even increased the number in the heyday of the 1950s. The newcomer Toei, established in 1949, followed the pattern and expanded its theaters, especially along the Tokyu Toyoko Line, a major commuter railway connecting Tokyo and Yokohama. These studios survived the decline of film production by collecting revenues on the distribution and theater receipts of Japanese and Hollywood films. Nikkatsu and Daiei, on the other hand, without their own theaters, suffered a lack of cash flow, which accelerated the closure or
curtailment of their businesses. The tendency to reduce production and depend on distribution and theatrical revenues has become a viable business strategy for the major film companies, which are for the most part film studios without production.\textsuperscript{43}

At present, so-called independent—or \textit{furi} (freelancer) in Japanese terms—filmmaking has become the norm. Beginning in the 1990s, independent film production gained ground against the major three companies (Shochiku, Toho, and Toei), increasing dramatically from 18 percent in 1992 to 32 percent in 1997.\textsuperscript{44} In 2008, the numbers of the major three and the independents have completely reversed: The production number of the major Japanese studios is now only 15 percent, though those major companies have also invested in some independent films as coproducers.\textsuperscript{45} The independent filmmakers are now major players, producing films with much tighter budgets and under more constraints due to their investors’ unwillingness to shoulder significant risks. Indeed, the defining characteristic of contemporary cinema in Japan is that it belongs to this post-studio condition.

Even Yamada Yoji, the longtime Shochiku director of the hugely popular Tora-san series (1969–1995), for instance, is not exempt from this condition. Since his later films, such as his Academy Award–nominated Best Foreign Language Film \textit{The Twilight Samurai} (\textit{Tasogare seibei}, 2002), were being financed by the Seisaku Iinkai (a film investment group), Yamada dealt with several investors, such as an advertisement company (Hakuhodo), a television network (Nippon Television), and a trading company (Sumitomo Corp.). The film was shot entirely on location, namely Tsuruoka in Yamagata Prefecture and Motaishuku in Nagano Prefecture, where Yamada built an open set instead of renting expensive studios. Yamada’s former company, Shochiku, limited its contribution to the film’s production by providing extras (Shochiku Kyoto Yosei-jo), music production (Shochiku Music Publishing), and sound recording (Shochiku Sound Studio), and yet Shochiku monopolized the film’s domestic distribution, both in movie theaters and DVDs and other post-cinematic products. This pattern has become the norm of production and distribution in the current Japanese film industry.

One might think of Studio Ghibli as a counterexample of the post-studio condition, with its films’ enormous theatrical successes. But despite its prefix “studio,” it is more reasonable to consider Ghibli as an independent film producer in the Japanese visual media industry. Until 2004, Ghibli had always produced their feature-length animations with the publishing company Tokuma’s financial backing, and Toho has distributed all of Ghibli’s films domestically except for \textit{My Neighbors the Yamadas} (\textit{Hohoekyo tonari no Yamada-kun}, 1999, distributed by Shochiku). In other words, while Ghibli’s
films have generated top sales for the film company Toho, the way in which Ghibli produces and circulates its feature animations has been remarkably similar to other independent film producers, often manufacturing films under the financial system of Seisaku Iinkai. This pattern, though, is likely changing, as Ghibli parted ways with Tokuma Shoten Publishing Co. to become a public limited company in 2004, with Hoshino Koji, the former representative of Walt Disney Company (Japan) Ltd., as its new president in 2008. However, Ghibli was capitalized at a relatively modest 10 million yen (about U.S.$130,000) in 2011, which is about 1/1,000th of Toho’s capitalization and 1/3,000th of Shochiku’s (Toho U.S.$125 million in 2010; Shochiku U.S.$377 million in 2009).

With the loss of the studios as centers of production, the majority of filmmakers in Japan have found new production modes and thematic focuses that distinguish their films from previous ones—in particular, the assimilation of digital media and the representation of the transnational. The former has made it possible to lower production costs, especially compared with 35mm film, and the latter has increased opportunities for overseas distribution and promotions via a number of international film festivals. While many old-school filmmakers still adhere to 35mm, they increasingly rely on a digital video recording system to check each take in order to economize their production costs. I argue in this book that the characteristics of these contemporary films constitute Japan’s response to the variegated flows of global economics and cultures. What is happening in Japanese contemporary cinema addresses the dilemma faced by other national cinemas, whether in the East or West, many of which are struggling to remain viable at the global level of cinema consumption.

**JAPAN’S MEDIA CONVERGENCE**

It is necessary, however, to highlight that Japan’s film business occupies an atypical position compared with other East Asian screen industries.46 Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh introduce three distinct production and distribution practices, or “benchmarks,” in contemporary East Asian screen businesses.47 In the case of South Korea, “the state crafted a cinema boom resulting from capitalist incentives for commercial reinvention of national cinema.” Davis and Yeh emphasize the commitment of *chaebol* (giant conglomerates) in the new pattern of production, distribution, and marketing of the visual industry in South Korea. As the second benchmark, they draw on the case of Chinese-language film, such as Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). The box-office success of the film set a standard for
transnationally financed pan-Chinese productions, and a number of successors, such as *Hero* (2002, Zhang Yimou), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004, Zhang Yimou), and *The Promise* (2005, Chen Kaige), have followed this pattern. The third benchmark is illustrated with the Hong Kong cinema’s recent success, especially film series such as *Infernal Affairs* (2002, Lau Wai-keung and Mak Siu Fai). They describe its characteristic as “synthesizing local genre elements with international styles and norms.” Davis and Yeh, however, clearly make the distinction that Japan’s screen business is atypical compared with those East Asian benchmarks and emphasize its concentration of cross-media business within the culture: “Japan’s huge production, consumption and intricate distribution networks make it the area heavyweight, the biggest screen player—yet set apart from regional trends. . . . The [Japanese] screen industry is a gigantic enterprise with complex links between film, video, television, telecommunication, animation, publishing, advertising and game design.”

As a response to the new condition of post-studio, decentralized production, Japanese cinema has shifted its position more profoundly within the nexus of the current popular culture, increasing its affinity with other visual media and industries *domestically*. The boundaries between cinema and television, film and other visual media have grown more permeable due to the nature of digital technology; that is, “content” is easily transferable to any media. The buzzwords *kontentsu sangyo* (content businesses)—more specifically, businesses producing various forms of visual and sound culture, such as *manga* (comic books), anime (animation), computer games, character goods (such as Hello Kitty, Doraemon, and Pokémon), popular music, trendy television programs, and films—describe the current state of those culture industries. In other words, “media convergence,” to borrow Henry Jenkins’ term, has intensified *intraculturally* through both the flow of cultural content across numerous media platforms and the cooperation between multiple media industries. Analyzing the condition, some cultural critics, such as Azuma Hiroki, assert that a completely new critical paradigm for the “contents” of a variety of media is required in order to discuss contemporary Japanese popular culture. Yet framing the present convergence of media as an irreparable postmodern rift has the scent of market opportunism—the promotion of a recycled truism as something “new.” I will elaborate on this aspect in the conclusion.

It is worth noting that Japanese television drama (J-drama) has been taking a radically different move from cinema in terms of expanding its consumer market throughout the East Asian cultural sphere, and the dissimilarity is caused by their different levels of affinity with the “regional” technology video compact disc (VCD). Due to its high compatibility with VCD, J-drama has been extremely trendy in East Asia. VCD is indeed a
significant new medium in terms of discussing J-drama in interregional cultural flow. VCDs are especially well liked in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the overseas Chinese diasporic communities, but intriguingly they are virtually absent from the Japanese, North American, and European markets.\textsuperscript{52} The irony of VCDs, as Davis and Yeh indicate, is that “Sony, Panasonic, and other Japanese companies make and sell VCD players for a large Asian market—excluding Japan.”\textsuperscript{53} Without the Japanese broadcast industry's strict censorship and regulations, J-drama was widely circulated in the cultural sphere of East Asia, though that affinity did not take place in the case of cinema, which is historically more regulated and strictly licensed by distributors. Since the trend of J-drama and its circulation through VCD in East Asia require their own research projects, J-drama and VCDs are beyond the scope of this book and will not be discussed here.

Although cinema and television cultures have distinct flows in the regional cultural sphere, one area of proximity between television and cinema still needs to be pointed out here. The television medium has indirectly supported the cinema's affinity with popular culture by assuming the role of launching new talent and nurturing existing old-time movie stars. This has led to a symbiotic relation between cinema and television, as in the boom of trendy television dramas with the appearance of movie stars. Likewise, filmmakers since the late 1980s have drawn from television's talent pool and tended to use less expensive, emerging stars such as Yakusho Koji, Watanabe Ken, Toyokawa Etsushi, and Asano Tadanobu, all of whom started their careers on television. It has been almost four decades since the collapse of the studios' star system, and the boundaries between movie and television stars have been blurring. In other words, movie stars in a traditional sense have almost completely vanished, except for superstars such as Takakura Ken and Yoshinaga Sayuri.

In this sense, the filmmaker Kitano Takeshi's way of distinguishing his personas—Kitano Takeshi as a filmmaker and Beat Takeshi as a television persona—is a significant phenomenon since it underlines the current relationship between Japanese cinema and television. Critics such as Abe Casio highlight Kitano's opposing dual identity to the two media, not their connection or reciprocity: “Kitano's portrayal of a series of criminals has made it possible for him to completely avoid the phenomenon of televisionesque flesh in his own films.”\textsuperscript{54} Abe draws the cinematic image of Kitano neglecting and destroying his television image as a clever, sharp-tongued, but nonetheless intimate comedian. Daisuke Miyao's analysis develops the binary opposition as an indication of power dynamics in Japanese television-oriented popular culture: “Takeshi Kitano . . . embodies the gap between cinephilia and telephilia in the Japanese context. . . . The gap between the critical success of Kitano’s
films and the enormous popularity of Beat Takeshi as a television personality implies the nature of telephilia-oriented film culture in contemporary Japanese society. Consciously or unconsciously, Kitano problematizes the inevitable coexistence between TV and cinema in Japan.55

Against the dichotomies of Kitano Takeshi vs. Beat Takeshi or filmmaker vs. television comedian, however, other critics, such as Aaron Gerow, question the way of viewing the two media, cinema and television, as separated or antagonized enterprises. Gerow writes that “the divisions in his identity have thus never been easily reducible to the television/cinema split.”56 By citing Kitano’s stated metaphor, “television as ‘insurance’ allowing him to do very different work in cinema,” Gerow views Kitano’s relationship between television and cinema as one where television is the source of his financing and serves as the testing grounds for filmmaking ideas.57 In other words, for Kitano, cinema is another platform where he can express or engender something that he cannot do on television. The dichotomy between television and cinema is also challenged by the fact that Kitano uses the name “Kitano Takeshi” for his publications as well. Kitano is also renowned as a prolific writer, and he has published more than sixty books in Japanese. Those books, however, have never been written solely by him; instead they are produced by spin crews or they are collections of interviews.58 The question here is his authorship. While film is always a creative product of combined efforts, Kitano has manufactured his publications in the same way. This “writer” without writing reminds us of the impossibility of straightforward indexicality between an author and his or her product. It seems to be more reasonable to conceptualize Kitano as “cultural industry,” to borrow Davis’ term, than an author of different cultural products in film, television, and printed media.59 Kitano, the cultural industry, is connected with all those media platforms, and the structure that he deploys effectively functions within the aforementioned content industry in Japan, or “convergent culture” in Jenkins’ terms.

The various filmmakers coming from different backgrounds, such as Kitano from television, have accelerated the transformation of the cinema’s affinity with other media. With the loss of studios as training grounds for new directors, many emerging filmmakers have come from other fields, such as Ichikawa Jun (Tony Takitani, 2004) and Nakashima Tetsuya (Memories of Matsuko, 2006) from commercial production, Wada Makoto (Uneasy Encounters, 1994) from printed media illustration, Mitani Koki (The Magic Hour, 2008) from theater, and Kore’eda Hirokazu (Still Walking, 2008) from television documentary work. In the era of post-studio cinema, alongside those filmmakers with training outside of cinema, the contribution of graduates from art universities and film schools has grown significantly. Hashiguchi
Ryosuke (All around Us, 2008), for instance, is a graduate of the film production program in Osaka University of Arts, and Kawase Naomi (The Mourning Forest, 2007) graduated from the film production program in Visual Arts Osaka.

It is well known that animation artists, such as Oshii Mamoru and An’no Hideaki, are not only enthusiastic cinephiles but have also made live-action films (Avalon, 2001, Oshii; Ritual, 2000, An’no) that target the cross-media audience—that is, animation fans. Otomo Katsuhiro, the creator of the groundbreaking animation Akira (1988), directed the recent box-office success Bugmaster (Mushishi, 2006). Miyazaki Hayao’s animation productions with Studio Ghibli have benefited from the studio’s tie-in with the Tokuma Publishing Company, which has assumed the roles of producer since Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (Kaze no naka no Naushika, 1984), promoter of Ghibli’s animations in its monthly animation magazine Animage (1978–present), and publisher for all of Ghibli’s print products, such as comics and children’s picture books.

The post-studio filmmakers’ notable successes have conducted the fusion of the audience/consumer in various fields of cinema, television, theater, publishing, popular music, and animation. The concept of media mix, anime’s early strategy of product tie-ins, has been fully expanded to the contemporary cinema culture in Japan. In 2006, with its revived popularity among the domestic Japanese audience, a series of box-office successes, and its visibility in international film festivals as well as Hollywood remakes, film critic Mori Naoto declared that the contemporary Japanese cinema had finally succeeded in reversing its perceived “negative” image to a “positive” one. The share of Japanese films in the domestic market, indeed, had long been lower than foreign films since 1975, but the proportion has reversed since 2006.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

The changes brought about by the increased use of digital shooting and computerized editing systems have become apparent in the new cinema’s aesthetic. In place of expensive 35mm film, high-definition digital video is often used and later blown up to 35mm for theatrical release. With lightweight cameras, less equipment, and smaller crews, filmmakers have developed new cinema that can attract both Japanese and global audiences. In order to avoid the high rental costs of the studios, contemporary filmmakers have tended to make films on location much as the American cinema verité filmmakers did with 16mm cameras in the 1960s. As a result, new filmic styles, such as feature dramas incorporating formal aspects of documentary, have appeared in
contemporary Japanese cinema. The documentary-style drama emphasizes ordinary Japanese landscapes, experiences, and identities more than ever, and moreover, it expresses a sense of contemporaneity, something “authentic” to present-day Japan.

Japanese cinema in the digital age, at the same time, shares aesthetic similarities with other national cinemas created under parallel industrial conditions. These include the Chinese Urban Generation cinema, especially Zhang Yuan’s documentaries and narrative features; Jia Zhangke’s oeuvres, including Still Life (Sanxia haoren, 2006) and 24 City (Er shi si cheng ji, 2008); Li Yang’s Blind Shaft (Mong jing, 2003); the Dogme 95 series, exemplified by Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier’s The Idiots (Idioterne, 1998); and Belgian Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s Rosetta (1999) and The Child (L’enfant, 2005). Laurent Cantet’s The Class (Entre les murs, 2008) popularized the style even for American audiences. Those filmmakers do not belong to film studios and need to work as producers as well in order to obtain enough financing for filmmaking. While many of these films are made with digital technology, what the filmmakers deal with consists of people from everyday life rooted in a specific locale, region, or culture. Kore’eda Hirokazu, for instance, with a background in television documentary, has created feature films within this aesthetic tradition, and his film Nobody Knows (Dare mo shiranai, 2004) received high critical praise for crossing boundaries between feature film and documentary. While the film tells a story based on an actual incident of a mother deserting her children, the alienation of the children’s life is depicted through images of mundane acts in the Tokyo metropolis, such as shopping at a convenience store, playing video games at home, and drying their clothes on the balcony of their small apartment. Each sequence obtains a sense of contemporary Tokyo, which is unique from any other place in the world. This contributes to the filmic aesthetic being at once universal and local.

The sense of the universal and the local in film’s aesthetics has also become significant in animation artists’ play with techniques of photo-realism. By using computer graphic software such as Photoshop, Shinkai Makoto, for instance, embeds photo images from Tokyo suburbs in his animation. This process reproduces a similar effect of shooting the actual locales in film production but in a more intensified and strategic way in his animations. His one-man production Voices of a Distant Star (Hoshi no koe, 2002), for instance, materializes those local images as objects of desire for the characters set in the futuristic narrative space. The local areas from Tokyo neighborhoods or its outskirts captured in various animation images provoke the audience as objects of nostalgia, which appear in digital gadgets such as the personal computer, the cell phone, the iPhone, and the BlackBerry.
As the multiformats in animation markets exemplify, the cinema’s transformation through digital technology occurs in its distribution and reception as well. A major change in film distribution began in the 1980s with the availability of film on video for home viewing, accelerated in the mid-1990s by DVD’s improved visual and sound quality. Within this transformation, certain film genres have achieved unparalleled success—notably anime (Japanese animation), action film series in V-CINEMA (a feature “film” without theatrical release, distributed only on videotape/DVD), horror films, and adult video (AV). With legions of enthusiastic fans, anime, for instance, has emerged as a purchase-oriented medium since the 1980s. Many anime auteurs are creating feature-length films for theatrical release as well as television series and cycles of post-theatrical video or DVD releases, such as An’no Hideaki’s Neon Genesis Evangelion (Shin seiki evangerion, 1995). The confluence of B-movie genres and DVD distribution since the late 1990s has led to an unprecedented boom in the production of J-horror and Asia Extreme (a label coined by the recently defunct video/DVD distributor Tartan Video), with subsequent Hollywood adaptations in continuous production.62

The current cinema’s increasing affinity with new media, typically digital video production, occurs not only at the level of individual filmmakers but also through the major studios’ adjustment to the new era of production and distribution. Toei Film Company, for instance, has largely shifted to the V-CINEMA since the 1990s. As a pioneer of the V-CINEMA filmmakers, Takahashi Banmei directed the first successful work, Neo-Punk, the Lost Messenger (Neo chinpira, teppodama pyu, 1990). Representative directors of this period, Kurosawa Kiyoshi (Suit Yourself or Shoot Yourself series, 1995–1996) and Miike Takashi (Full Metal Yakuza, 1997), established their careers as prolific V-CINEMA directors and emerged as directors for higher-budget productions, whether in high-definition video or film.

One significant development in contemporary digital cinema has been the adjustment of theaters, especially the emergence of the cinema complex with its increased number of screens. While this has become the norm for cinema in the digital age, in Japan the cinema complex has been shaped by the local contours of digital movie viewing along with the prevalence of independent films with their low-spectacle and personal narratives, which are thoroughly compatible with a diminished size of screen. Toei, for instance, has invested in digital distribution and reception by launching a new cinema complex franchise, T-JOY, equipped with Digital Light Processing (DLP) and satellite distribution. Since the first cinema complex, Warner Mycal Ebina, was built in Ebina City, Kanagawa, in 1993, the cinema complex’s percentage of all screens has become 76 percent in 2007.63 Although the early cinema
complexes were built in suburban shopping malls like Ebina, from 2003 on, cinema complexes in Japan have gradually advanced into the major cities’ central districts, such as Roppongi, Shinjuku, and Shibuya in Tokyo. The pattern of development of those cinema complexes has started affecting distribution patterns with greater selection and tailoring films toward a smaller theater screen. As a result, the number of screens in Japan has radically increased, for instance, from 1,993 screens in 1998 to 3,221 in 2007, a 60 percent upsurge in ten years. Yet, while the number of Japanese film releases has increased along with the booming number of screens—from 238 in 1993 to 407 in 2007—the number of moviegoers has not changed significantly in the same period: 130.72 million in 1993 to 163 million in 2007. To put this in perspective, on average in 2007, Americans went to a movie theater 4.578 times while the Japanese went only 1.277 times. As the numbers indicate, Japan’s film viewing in post-theatrical media, such as video, DVD, and Blu-ray, has radically superseded theater viewing, and the number of post-theatrical media viewers is reported at more than 900 million, which approaches the industry’s peak in 1958 of 1.12745 billion.

THE TRANSNATIONAL WITHIN THE CULTURAL IMAGINATION

After a long-term decline that began in the 1960s, Japanese cinema has achieved its long-sought recovery through a major structural shift to concentrated cross-media businesses targeted at the domestic market. It is something of a paradox that while the screen industry has focused on the domestic audience, many of the actual films reveal a palpable sense of the transnational, fluidity in identities, and national boundaries. Recent narratives treat as commonplace that the Japanese, particularly young people, are adept at living and working abroad. But the interesting aspect of this transnational sensibility is the films’ emphasis on the particularities of time and locale—most frequently in present-day Asia.

Reflecting the gradual political and economic shifts of the post–Cold War period, this regional emphasis in contemporary Japanese cinema restructures and reimagines Japan’s place within the world. By way of comparison, Kurosawa Akira’s jidaigeki films in the 1980s, Kagemusha (1980) and Ran (1985), highlighted an exotic Japan with their theatricality and spectacle, which were arguably intended to appeal to worldwide audiences. Kurosawa’s reiteration of grand themes from Western literary humanism also secured Japan’s place within the cosmopolitan community. The cultural vector from Japan to the West is no longer the solitary path in the contemporary Japanese cinema, as
the films reveal the new mapping of Japan within the region of Asia. While filmmakers in Japan have consciously aimed at international reception via film festivals or international distribution of film and DVD, they have also engaged the domestic audience’s interest with self-reflexive ties to national identity or, alternately, subverting the conventions of “official” identity narratives.

The director Sai Yoichi’s ethnic cinema, for instance, often centralizing zainichi Koreans (resident Koreans in Japan) in his films’ cinematic space, takes the place of the Japanese audience’s object of desire in the midst of the Korean wave (Kanryu or Hallyu) in the early 2000s. The frequent appearance of zainichi Koreans or migrant workers from other Asian nations in the contemporary Japanese cinema signals displacement of the nation’s xenophobia both within material conditions of everyday life and within the cultural imaginary, the repository for how the Japanese want to be seen or see themselves. The bitter history of Japan’s imperialism in Asia and the unresolved issues of compensation are also displaced within a metanarrative of pan-Asian commonality and understanding. In Zhang Yimou’s Japanese-financed film, Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles (2005), the initial difficulty of communication and cultural differences leads to genuine understanding and affection between the old Japanese man and Chinese locals, which is further pronounced through the iconic Japanese star Takakura Ken befriending a Chinese boy. The popular Japanese films, Pacchigi! (2004) and Pacchigi! Love & Peace (2007), highlight the struggle of zainichi Koreans, softened through the cross-cultural romance between a Japanese man and a zainichi Korean woman.

Characterizing the recent Japanese cinema as “landscape cinema with unknown bodies (mumeiteki nikutai no, fukei no eiga),” Abe Casio underlines the pan-Asian quality of the characters’ bodies, embedded in the ubiquitous, often denationalized landscape of the cinema.\(^6^8\) Miike Takashi’s Ley Lines (Nihon kuroshakai—ley lines, 1999)—arguably the quintessential Miike film—for instance, casts the second generation of Japanese orphans in China (zanryu koji), who escape from an unknown countryside in China to Shinjuku, Tokyo, and further dream about fleeing to Brazil, a country with old Japanese immigrants.\(^6^9\) For Abe, Miike’s way of using the various locales lacks a sense of Asia as grounded reality and rather reveals a sense of displacement or provisionality toward individual identity.\(^7^0\) I would interpret the image’s indeterminacy as a representation of the Japanese cultural imagination, the cultural sphere that is only sustained by its differentiation from others. Along with the Korean cultural boom in Japan from the early 2000s, the motif of Asia as a borderless region has become a crucial signifier in the contemporary Japanese cinema, one which attracts the Japanese desire to be transnational, unconstrained by official identity roles and self-affirmed as cosmopolitan.
Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age addresses the crucial role of digital technology in Japanese cinema from the 1990s to the present by examining the salient film genres or media networks—horror, documentary-style fiction, animation, transnational cinema, and ethnic cinema—which have particularly shown their affinity with this technological development. The impact of new media (digital cameras, computer editing, digital projection, and alternative distribution via DVD and Blu-ray Disc) on cinema has been enormous. Meanwhile, academic discourses have failed to address the surprising speed and uncertainty of these changes within various national cinemas. As technological and industrial transformations permeate film production and distribution, a new cinema has reshaped our vision of national cinema to one that is more transnational, literally and imaginatively. This book attempts to map, however tentatively, this changing topography by addressing central questions regarding current Japanese cinema: What has been the impact of digital production and distribution on cinema? While the digitalization of these processes has been popularized all over the globe, the results are not necessarily the same as one might find in, for instance, J-horror, one of the most successful cases of the transitional assimilation between cinema and digital technology. I investigate this process within the nexus of local cultural imperatives and global cultural flows. Another question is: How have new technologies affected the construction of identity within and through cinematic mediation? This second question entails a more primary query of how national identity in cinema is deconstructed through the current transmediated platforms, such as DVDs. If power politics always shape the structure of one’s social identity, as Stuart Hall asserts, what current forces determine the identity of Japanese cinema? I explore this question by focusing on the current use of the term “transnational”—a conspicuous substitution for “national,” in my view—in both the industrial and academic spheres. And finally, I would like to consider whether national cinema truly becomes transnational cinema, which, for some scholars, represents a new vehicle for renovating the discipline of cinema and media studies.

This book is organized with five chapters focusing on the effects of new media on the characteristic of the transnational in contemporary Japanese cinema. All chapters grapple with the ongoing contestations and negotiations between cinema and digital media, the national and the transnational, and global cinema and Japanese local culture through analyses of the works by such timely filmmakers as Nakata Hideo, Shimizu Takashi, Kore’eda Hirokazu, Kawase Naomi, Hara Kazuo, Tsuchiya Yutaka, Takahata Hideta, and Sai Yoichi, as well as animation artists Oshii Mamoru, Shinkai Makoto, and Yamamura Koji. I have been very fortunate in being able to interview many of them, sometimes visiting their production offices or conducting an
interview over lengthy correspondence by e-mail. The reoccurring impression throughout the interviews is that unlike studio production in the 1950s, the filmmakers must resolve anew issues of labor and finance with each production outside of studios. Their role is not limited simply to directing a film, but they are rather involved as producers, securing financing, obtaining suitable casts, and taking care of postproduction matters such as finding distribution and promoting their films.

Chapter 1 provides an analysis of the horror genre cinema, which emerged in the late 1990s along with the rise of DVDs and Internet fan culture. As the case of J-horror exemplifies, the new digitalized multimedia form of cinema is now a dispersed phenomenon, both ubiquitous and transnational as technology, yet regional in the economic, industrial, and cultural contingencies of its acceptance. I would argue that such a phenomenon as national cinema challenging the centrality of Hollywood products and their distribution is not entirely new in film history, but what makes those “alternative” films most interesting is their vernacular staging within a specific time, locale, and media. How did J-horror, which began as a low-budget alternative genre (one that is intrinsically linked to regional popular culture), become a transnational film franchise? The answer lies in the contingencies of industrial conditions—production, textual elements, distribution, and consumption—underlying the genre’s emergence or expansion from the 1990s on as a form of transitional filmmaking, which is less based on theatrical modes of exhibition than on new digital forms of media. Highlighting the work of the seminal J-horror director Shimizu Takashi, I analyze the film Marebito (2004), revealing its high affinity with digital technology not only on the level of production and distribution but also on the level of its self-reflexive narrative as the technology demonically merges with the protagonist’s own cognition.

Chapter 2 elaborates on how digital technology forges a documentary-style in cinema. A new filmic style—the feature film that uses documentary technique as its primary mode of expression—has appeared in the contemporary Japanese cinema. At the level of production, digital’s influence is most apparent in the increased use of digital cameras, which has resulted in a blurring of boundaries between film and video, fiction and documentary. Eschewing the cost of filming on sets, this method of filmmaking emphasizes shooting in Japanese locales and representing the everyday experiences of ordinary people, and yet it also shares aesthetic similarities with other national cinemas created under parallel industrial conditions as I explained earlier. This chapter examines a style of authenticity that is now prevalent in Japanese fiction and documentary films, especially the personal documentary. Three films are at the center of my discussion: Nobody Knows, Tarachime (2006, Kawase Naomi),
INTRODUCTION

and *The New God* (*Atarashii kamisama*, 1999, Tsuchiya Yutaka). Drawing upon the documentary tradition, these films highlight the stylistic merging of fiction and documentary and express a sense of unstable actuality by playing with digital aesthetics and the idea of authenticity.

Chapter 3 contextualizes anime’s ongoing development within a history of converging media forms. While much of what is written on anime rests upon notions of intrinsic cultural difference, the history of anime’s diverse range of media platforms, genres, textual aesthetics, and various activities in its reception—such as otaku culture and costume play (*kosupure*)—demonstrates otherwise. Anime is a discursively constructed term that I view as “a nodal point in a transmedial network,”72 to borrow Thomas Lamarre’s designation, which deserves to be examined in specific historical—local and at once global—contexts. As an alternative to the cultural determinism that has configured anime studies, I discuss how technological developments in media have shaped anime production and stylistic diversity, primarily as matters of production scale and targeted audience. Thus, when it first appeared as television cartoons with limited animation, Japanese anime represented a radical departure from Disney movies. But closer to the present, anime, in such high-budget, feature-length films as *Akira*, also displaces the jerky movement of limited animation in its marketing to the global audience. Or in the case of *Evangelion* (1995–1996), originally a television series that morphed into a media-mix product through film, DVD, and games, anime becomes a conscious return to limited animation in its search for distinction in the global animation marketplace. Throughout its history, anime has reflected the local response to the global culture, whether as a strategy of localization, delocalization, or relocalization.

The animation works of Shinkai Makoto and Yamamura Koji serve as examples of the smaller “cottage industry” production that digital technology has enabled. Shinkai’s *Voices of a Distant Star*, for instance, captures local ambiance through digital photo images of mundane everyday life, transformed by Adobe Photoshop, a graphic editing program, into anime scenes. Yamamura, on the other hand, intentionally relocalizes the images of Japan—cherry blossoms, gray-suited salarymen—in his art film *Mount Head* (*Atamayama*, 2002) as a strategy for garnering recognition by international animation festivals. His later work, *Franz Kafka’s A Country Doctor* (*Kafka—Inaka isha*, 2007) orchestrates images (that are visually removed from Japanese identity) and audio (that deploys the traditional *kyogen* players’ voice over) to a profoundly unsettling effect.73 At the other end of the scale, anime’s high affinity with digital technology subverts the existing dichotomy of Disney-style realism versus Japanese animation’s limited movement. Oshii Mamoru’s *Amazing Lives of the Fast Food Grifters* (*Tachiguishi retsuden*, 2006) exemplifies...
the stylistic diversity of experimental realism by deploying a variety of visual media: drawings, photos, computer-generated imagery (CGI), and paper theater (kamishibai), all of which parallel the risk-taking tendencies of the smaller but flexible Japanese animation industry.

Chapter 4 analyzes the concept of transnationalism in contemporary Japanese cinema. The term “transnational cinema” has been posed as a substitute for “national cinema,” which has long been criticized for various reasons. While nationalism has been repeatedly invented in popular culture, national borders have become increasingly permeable. Global exchanges have noticeably accelerated with the development of communication technologies. In the case of film studies, the expansion of multinational finance and the diversified distribution beyond theatrical release has put the present framework of national cinema in a tenuous position. Although the concept of national cinema can be seen as obsolete, I am still skeptical of the abrupt shift in film and media studies to a transnational framework, especially in the post–Cold War period. The recent shift brings another set of questions, theoretical and historical. This chapter examines the issue of transnational cinema from dual angles: on the level of discursive construction in film studies and on the level of film texts, especially in terms of space, identity, and language. I interrogate what benefit, if any, the framework of transnational cinema brings us over that of national cinema through my analysis of the Japanese film, *The Hotel Venus* (2004, Takahata Hideta).

Chapter 5 examines the attractions of ethnic cinema, specifically in the case of *Blood and Bones*, which depicts the transnational figures of zainichi Koreans residing in Japan. This chapter examines the tension between the cinematic effect and its related knowledge, especially knowledge associated with Japanese popular culture—the “cultural imaginary” as it were, nurtured by such seemingly disparate discourses as Korean images in Japanese cinema, the star discourse of Kitano Takeshi, television family dramas in the 1970s, and the professional wrestling hero, Rikidozan. Is the tension *Blood and Bones* presents different from other ethnic films in Japan? How does this tension operate through the film? Recalling the director Sai’s ambition of reaching a wider audience, how does the film enact the contradiction of the ethnic desire, being “minor” in its social status yet “major” in its aspiration? I argue that *Blood and Bones* is strategically targeted to domestic audiences through the Japanese “cultural imagination,” a practice that can only be sustained by differentiating the cultural sphere from something else, in this film’s case from Korean or zainichi Korean culture. I elaborate on the film’s cinematic effect and how this is wrapped up with the cultural knowledge, or schemata, drawn upon by the film.