



Article

# Projected on the Dusk: Seeking Cinema in 1910s and 1920s Japanese Poetry

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**Abstract:** In this article, I explore a set of poetic works from early 20th-century Japan that took cinema—films, movie theaters, screenings, sets, and a variety of cinematic technologies—as their main subject. An enormous range of poets, including some of modern Japanese poetry’s most canonical figures, took a diverse set of approaches to the subject matter, but all were less interested in portraying films themselves, and more in how poetry could use “cinema” and the “cinematic” to grapple with questions of memory, media, ecology, the body, and social change. Looking at these works—most of which appear here in English for the first time—we can find a new archive of early cinematic thought and sensation not bound to the screen.

**Keywords:** Japan; poetry; cinema; prewar; modernism

## 1. Introduction

With the blossoming of cinema at the turn of the 20th century came new preoccupations in poetry. Poets attempted, on the one hand, to harness the powers of cinema on the page, and on the other, to use poetry to reimagine the “cinematic” itself. Threaded throughout these poems was a conception of the cinematic not *necessarily* linked to the filmic apparatus—in other words, to the acts of filming, projecting, or viewing a “movie”. Each of these poems is an example of the poet reaching towards a kind of cinematic thought: an imaginary, an arrangement of sensation, or a reconceptualization of reality informed by a kind of “cinema” not bound to the screen. In Japan, poems engaging with cinema and the cinematic flourished as early as the 1910s and exploded in popularity in the late 1920s. The earlier works will be the focus of this article, which aims to serve as an introduction to a curated selection of this largely unknown group of materials—most appearing here in English for the first time—highlighting connecting threads between them while not subsuming their diversity under a single explanatory schema.

What do we gain, however, from examining this group of writings, minor even within the enormously under-explored context of early 20th century Japanese poetry? First and foremost, I argue that by looking at poetic engagements with early cinema, we find something at the interface of the poetic and the cinematic that is far more expansive than “film influencing poetry” or “poetry reshaping film”. These were modernist and proto-modernist experiments in imagination and sensation themselves, using poetic language to project the “cinematic” internally and externally—onto the body, the walls of the theater, the surrounding landscapes, on memories, and on dreams—as an attempt to articulate new realities at a time of extreme medial, technological, social, and political change. In other words, as is so often the case, within poetry we can find articulations of thoughts, sensations, and experiences that were often too small, strange, abstract, or unsystematic to be easily found in fiction, philosophy, or even film itself.

No less important is these works’ value as an underexplored reservoir of thought about cinema and mediation more generally. Film was not just a new pool of imagery from which to draw, but in these poems became an object of reimagination and critique. These works have media archaeological value, not just in the conventional sense of highlighting



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obsolete and quickly-forgotten technologies, such as the “kineorama”, but more generally as an archive of early cinematic sensation within and beyond the movie houses.<sup>1</sup> They perform evocations of more subtle and less-easily grasped experiences of early film and the kineorama, and of the modes of viewing and feeling afforded by them.

The majority of poets whose works are explored here are firmly part of the “canon”, representing some of the most well-known names of modern Japanese poetry, in an attempt to highlight how these engagements with cinema were far from a fringe phenomenon. I want to emphasize, however, that the selected poems represent only the tiniest fragment of extant cinematic poetry from early 20th-century Japan. Poems about filmgoing, specific films, or in praise of movie stars likely numbered in the thousands, and were not only found in poetry journals and collections but on the pages of film journals, magazines, newspapers, and theater programs. Beyond the printed word, audiences of the time might have also encountered poetry in the form of live narration at screenings, or even as poetic intertitles within the films themselves. It is also important to note that by focusing on poems from the 1910s and early 1920s, this article does not touch on the late 1920s genre of the “cinepoem”, a form of poetry inspired by French-language Surrealist experiments by writers such as Benjamin Fondane, Robert Desnos, and Man Ray, but which achieved far greater popularity in Japan than in anywhere else in the world.<sup>2</sup> It is the earlier works featured in this article, however, that in part formed the grounds for later cinepoetic flourishing, establishing a variety of conventions for rendering the cinematic on the page that were both adhered to and subverted in the following decades.

In the next section, we will look at three of earliest Japanese poems to mention cinema or film, all from the 1910s. In them, we can already find three distinct approaches to cinema, each of which will continue to inform the majority of cinema-related poems in the subsequent decades: poetry centering film as metaphor, poetry as an archive of spectatorship, and poetry as a staging ground for new types of cinematic sensation. All these tendencies are closely interlinked, but what differs in each is to what the “cinematic” element in the poem is pointing, and aiming to make new or otherwise. The subsequent section will look at four poems from the early 1920s as later manifestations of and variations upon these approaches, just as cinematic poetry was about to move from being a rare motif to a full-fledged subgenre by the end of the decade.

## 2. Poetry and Cinema in the 1910s

What can film capture? More importantly, what can it not? “Shadows” (“In’ei”), a 1911 poem by the influential “poet laureate”-esque figure Kitahara Hakushū (1885–1942), excerpted here, is one of the first extant examples of a Japanese poem referencing cinematic technology, and the first of many to use it as a metaphor for memory and the passage of time. Yet this is not a vision of film as a stand-in for memory, the past fixed indelibly on celluloid—instead, it is a “pale flicker” that underlines memory’s fragility more than its persistence.

捉へがたき過ぎし日の歓楽よ、  
 哀愁よ、  
 すべてみな、かはたれにうつしゆく  
 薄青きシネマのまたたき、  
 いそがしき不可思議のそのフィルム

げにげにわかき日のキネオラマよ、  
 思ひ出はそのかげに伴奏くピアノ、  
 月と瓦斯との接吻（キス）、  
 瓏銀の水をゆく小舟。

The elusive pleasure of a passing day,

Sorrow,  
 All of it, a pale blue flicker of the cinema  
 Projected on the dusk,  
 That restless and mysterious film.

Kineorama of days so young;  
 Memories have a piano accompaniment behind them  
 A kiss of moon and gaslight,  
 A small boat moving across gemlike waters. (Kitahara 1911)

Both the “pleasure” and the “melancholy” of a passing day here become a flickering “film” (*firumu*) projected onto the impossible surface of the dusk—the proceeding of life itself is made into a vivid spectacle, but a strange and distant one. Kitahara refers to the “kineorama”, an early hybrid cinematic experience popular from around 1905 to the late 1910s that combined a moving mechanical miniature diorama of a scene on stage with a film projected onto it, meant to create the impression of weather changing in a landscape, fiery explosions in a naval scene, and so on.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the kineorama is of the narrator’s “days so young”, a vision of times past wreathed in shadow.

Again, however, this is not the fulfillment of a fantasy of suddenly having unfettered access to an earlier part of one’s life. Instead, memories have a “piano accompaniment”, or are produced as a special effect of projected moonlight and shining water. The discrete parts of the kineorama spectacle—projected image, miniature scene, musical accompaniment—are kept separate, refusing to cohere into a singular expression. We are left only with what is “elusive”, or more literally, “difficult to capture” (*toraegataki*): precisely by using the trappings of a medium, such as film, which can ostensibly recreate the same experience over and over, Kitahara foregrounds the impossibility of return to days past, and of memory as nothing more than a fleeting encounter with a simulation, over as quickly as it begins.

Rather than portraying film itself as a metaphor for memory, another equally widespread approach was to create poems that aimed to be a kind of archive of the experience of filmgoing and spectatorship. This tendency is represented early on by another 1911 poem, this time by the pioneering modern poet Ishikawa Takuboku (1886–1912). Although he was best known for his tanka, “Truly, at the Outskirts of this Town” (“*Ge ni, kano basue no*”) is one of the earliest poetic engagements with cinema in free verse:

げに、かの場末の縁日の夜の  
 活動写真の小屋の中に、  
 青臭きアセチレン瓦斯の漂へる中に、  
 鋭くも響きわたりし  
 秋の夜の呼子の笛はかなしかりしかな。  
 ひよろろと鳴りて消ゆれば、  
 あたり忽ち暗くなりて、  
 薄青きいたづら小僧の映画ぞわが眼にはうつりたる。  
 やがて、また、ひよろろと鳴れば、  
 声嘎れし説明者こそ、  
 西洋の幽霊の如き手つきして、  
 くどくどと何事を語り出でけれ。  
 我はただ涙ぐまれき。

されど、そは、三年も前の記憶なり。

はてしなき議論の後の  
 疲れたる心を抱き、  
 同志の中の誰彼の心弱さを憎みつつ、  
 ただひとり、雨の夜の町を帰り来れば、  
 ゆくりなく、かの呼子の笛が思ひ出されたり。  
 ——ひよろろろと、  
 また、ひよろろろと——

我は、ふと、涙ぐまれぬ。  
 げに、げに、わが心の餓えて空しきこと、  
 今も猶昔のごとし。

Truly, in a little motion picture theater  
 at the evening fair on the outskirts of this town,  
 within the wafting grassy scent of acetylene gas,  
 the sharp and resounding  
 whistle in the autumn night was quite a sad thing.  
 It cried out *hyorororo* and faded away,  
 and it immediately became dark,  
 and a pale film of a mischievous little boy was reflected in my eyes.  
 After a while, it once more cried out *hyororo*,  
 and the hoarse-voiced live narrator,  
 moving his hands like a Western ghost,  
 droned on about something or other.  
 I couldn't help but be moved to tears.

Yet that is a memory of three years ago.

Bearing a weary heart  
 after endless debates,  
 and hating the weakheartedness of my comrades,  
 I came home from town on a rainy night, all alone,  
 and, unexpectedly, that whistle came to mind.  
 — *hyorororo*, and  
 again, *hyorororo*—

I, suddenly, was moved to tears.  
 Truly, truly, my heart is starving and empty,  
 even now, as it was long ago.

(Ishikawa 1911)

Kondō Norihiko notes that this poem refers to three years earlier, 1908, in which the then 22-year-old Takuboku recorded in his diary the fourteen different times he went to watch movies or kineoramas, sometimes with friends, sometimes alone (Kondō 1986, p. 63). In this poem, the content of the film itself—a “mischievous little boy”—is only briefly alluded to, as is often the case with prewar poems that engage with cinema. A more expected approach might be to parallel the narrator's situation and the film's content, drawing contrast

between the carefree boy on screen and the poet as a young man uneasy in his newfound adulthood. Yet the focus instead is on the experience of filmgoing and the emotions triggered by the atmosphere and materiality of a film screening. Poets often exercised every part of the sensorium—not just vision—to evoke a broader sense of the cinematic, with what was on screen only one element among many. The space of the screening is created instead through the collision of senses: a whistle, the “grassy” smell of gas, the sudden fall of darkness, and the bright light of the film projector. Tears spring to the poet’s eyes unbidden not despite but *because* of everything working against a conventionally “immersive” cinematic experience—far from pitch blackness and perfect silence, the narrator is moved to tears, overwhelmed in the confluence of the shrill whistle, the hoarse speaker, the ghostly hands, and the faded projection. Three years later, at the conclusion of the poem, the same thing happens—this time, however, not at a theater, but during a walk home on a rainy night. The narrator—dissatisfied with the current state of his life and relationships—suddenly remembers the piercing whistle, an imagined sound that reactivates his experience of filmgoing. The intense affective site that was the “little motion picture theater” (*katsudō shashin no koya*) has returned outside of the space and time of its screenings, the narrator once again “moved to tears” (*namidagumare*) as he reflects upon just how little has changed.

Also of note here is the rare appearance in a poem of a “live narrator”, more specifically referred to as an “explainer” (*setsumeisha*). This was a term for the *benshi*, a highly significant figure in early Japanese film history.<sup>4</sup> It is almost a truism to point out that silent films were never silent, always having been accompanied by a piano, an ensemble of musicians, and/or sound effects. In very early film screenings across the world, there would be someone providing a live explanation of the mechanisms of the filmic apparatus. In Japan, however, this live “explainer” went from explaining the mechanisms of the film and projector towards providing live narration, singing, character voices, and more, all the way until the latter half of the 1930s. Their role was so prominent that the *benshi* often received top billing, above the film itself—a star *benshi* was the main draw for the audience, the center of the spectacle. Hayakawa Yoshie points out that when it comes to considering the confluence of cinema and poetry in Japan, the *benshi* also played an important but rarely discussed role. From the very beginning of film’s spread in Japan, she notes, screenings were combined with traditional Japanese verse through the *benshi*’s speech, whose *setsume* (explanations) were often in the syllabic form characteristic of haiku and tanka. They made full use of the tropes and aesthetics of those forms, and also drew inspiration from established narrative arts, such as bunraku and rakugo (Hayakawa 2012, pp. 733, 737). Jeffrey Dym explores this further: the *shitamachi* style of *benshi* narration in particular, he says, was also known as the *utai* (singing) style, and “strove for poeticism . . . the film was there as a visual source for the poetry” with the *benshi* often making use of five–seven–five meter (Dym 2003, p. 190). In “Truly, at the Outskirts of this Town”, however, Takuboku becomes his own “explainer” through modern free verse, narrating his own memories in the little theatre.

Another tendency within these poems-on-cinema—using cinema as a way to imagine new forms of sensation—was embodied early on by one of the poems in *Sacred Prisms* (*Seisanryōhari*) by Yamamura Bochō (1884–1924), a 1915 collection often pointed to as the first example of avant-garde Japanese poetry. Film is directly mentioned in “À FUTUR”, excerpted here:

わたしのさみしさを樹木は知り、壺は傾くのである。そして肩のうしろより低  
語き、なげきは見えざる玩具を愛す。猫の瞳孔がわたしの映画[フィルム]の外  
で直立し。朦朧なる水晶のよろこび。天をさして螺旋に攀ぢのぼる汚れない妖  
魔の肌の香。

A tree knows my loneliness, a pot tilts. And then whispers from behind my  
shoulder, lamentations that love an invisible toy. Cat pupils standing upright

outside my film. Hazy crystal joy. The scent of the unsullied skin of a demon pointing to the heavens and rising as a helix. (Yamamura 1915)

*Sacred Prisms* was startlingly experimental at a moment in which modernist works from Europe were only beginning to be imported and translated. While labelled by many as a Futurist, Yamamura himself preferred to call his work “Prisimist” (Zanotti 2011). The dense, unlineated “À FUTUR” certainly lives up to the Prisimist moniker in its use of seemingly absurd collections of images tied together by an overarching preoccupation with geometry, light, and movement. Here, outside what the narrator describes as “my film” (*watashi no eiga*, with the characters for “*eiga*” glossed as “*firumu*”) stand “cat pupils”. “Loneliness” is addressed by a “tree” meeting a tilting “pot”, in what is likely an abstracted take on a sex scene; a voice comes not from beside the screen but from behind one’s shoulder; a toy is introduced not as a spectacle but something “invisible”; there are seeing eyes, perhaps, but they are “cat pupils”, non-human, not looking at the “film” but remaining “outside it”. A “crystal joy” implies light and transparency, but we immediately move away from visuality and towards the “scent” of a demon, which in turn is made into a “helix”.

In this poem, then, film becomes the central linking image in a rapid sequence of optical and anti-optical phenomena all grounded in bodily sensation. In other words, cinema—conventionally thought of as a powerfully visual medium above all else—is made use of precisely to scramble visuality itself, the mention of “film” signaling the reader to attempt to try to imagine the proceedings in their mind’s eye and then reveling in that impossibility with every other sense and non-sense jostling for attention.

### 3. Poetry and Cinema in the Early 1920s

We see all three of these tendencies—the emphasis on film as metaphor, embodied experience, or as a springboard into new kinds of sensation—continue into the poetry of the early 1920s. The kineorama that first appeared in Kitahara’s poem also shows up in several works by Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933), including his “Winter Sketches” (“Fuyu no sukecchi”), a long series of diary-like poems that were likely written between 1921 and 1923, including the following fragment:

三人の  
げいしゃのあたま。

※

あたかもそのころ  
キネオラマに支度とて  
紫の燐光らしきもの  
横に舞台をよごりたり

The heads  
Of three geisha.

※

At that moment  
Preparing for the kineorama show  
Something like purple phosphorescence  
Crosses the stage (Miyazawa n.d.)

After mentioning the “heads of three geisha”—it is unclear if they are an image on screen, seated in front of the poet in the theater, or are completely unrelated—“something like purple phosphorescence crosses the stage” *before* the beginning of the kineorama show. Okubo Ryo speculates that this was a purple seen through or around the curtain upon which the pre-show film was projected, which he argues “interrupts the narrator’s devotion to the screen” (Okubo 2010, pp. 83–84).



It is important to note, however, that this is just one of many mentions of “phosphorescence” (*rinkō*) in Miyazawa’s “Winter Sketches”. Their very first line states that “buds are phosphorescent” (*me wa rinkō*); later, he mentions “that phosphorescence of the snowy alder tree” (*yuki no hannoki no sono rinkō*) and, at another point, “the unseizable cross phosphorescence” (*nusumi ezu jūji rinkō*) (Miyazawa n.d.). Most notably, a fragment called “Traces” (“*Omokage*”) begins with a startling phrase: “On the phosphorescent disk of my mind’s eye” (*shinshō no rinkōban ni*). Hamagaki Seiji notes that the significance of the regular use of the term “mind’s eye” (*shinshō*) in Miyazawa’s work has long been debated, and this poem is his first use of the term, which he likely drew from its use in the field of psychology at the time (Hamagaki 2019). By linking this term to a “phosphorescent disk”—an image uncannily reminiscent of a CD, DVD, or LaserDisc, more than a half century before the lattermost’s invention—we see Miyazawa engage in the creation of a kind of speculative media technology of internal visualization, befitting a poet just as known for his children’s science fiction stories as for his poetry. While cinematic technology, including the kineorama, is conventionally linked to the light of a projector casting images on a surface, phosphorescence is a kind of light-emission not linked to combustion or electricity—it is rather something more characteristic of the worlds of animals, plants, and minerals, capturing light and continuing to glow long after exposure. The violet glow behind the kineorama curtain becomes linked in “Winter Sketches” to light-giving buds, trees, and holy figures, as well as a “disc” that projects imagery within one’s mind, the cinematic becoming just one more among an ecology of internal and external light-making phenomena.

Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), who, like Takuboku, often wrote poems dedicated to exploring a specific setting in detail, turns away from the space of the theater in “Suburbs” (“*Kōgai*”) from 1923, ostensibly towards an outdoor domestic tableau:

路は花園に入り、  
 カンナの黄な花が  
 両側に立つてゐる。  
 藁屋根の、矮い、  
 煤けた一軒の百姓家が  
 私を迎へる。  
 その入口の前に  
 石で囲んだ古井戸。  
 一人の若い男が鍬を洗つてゐる。  
 私のパラソルを見て、  
 五六羽の鶏が  
 向日葵の蔭へ馳けて行く。  
 黄楊の木の生垣の向うで  
 田へ落ちる水が、  
 ちよろ、ちよると鳴つてゐる。  
 唯だ、あれが見えねば好からう、  
 青いペンキ塗の  
 活動写真撮影場。

The road leads to the garden,  
 yellow canna flowers  
 standing on either side.  
 A farmer’s house,  
 thatched roof, squat and sooty,

welcomes me.  
 In front of its entrance,  
 an old well surrounded by stones.  
 A young man is washing his hoe.  
 Seeing my parasol,  
 five or six chickens hurry by  
 under the shade of the sunflowers.  
 The water draining in the rice field  
 on the other side of the boxwood hedges  
 makes a trickling sound.  
 I just wish I couldn't see  
 that blue-painted  
 movie set. (Yosano 1923)

The narrator strolls through a quaint pastoral scene, described in terms almost *too* picturesque. In the end, we realize why: such a perfect setting and its undoubtedly azure sky could only be a “blue painted movie set” (*aoi penki-nuri no katsudō shashin satsueiba*). Yosano’s narrator effectively becomes an actress on the set of this quasi-rural landscape, filled with generic but precisely-described archetypal figures—the “squat and sooty” farmer’s house, the “young man washing his hoe”, the “old well”, the “five or six chickens”. She leads the reader through this space, showing them one cheery sight after another, but at the last moment confides the reality of the situation, wishing she “couldn’t see” that it was just a makeshift creation all along. It remains ambiguous if this is indeed a set, or her jab at the artificiality of the suburban landscape and the narrator’s alienation within it. Nevertheless, the trappings of the cinematic become a way for Yosano to express a longing to *not* see through the trompe l’oeil of the world around her—she wishes, in fact, to be fooled just a little longer.

We see this longing for immersion captured in a poem from the same year by Yojijima Shunkichi (1902–1981), a penname of the poet Katsu Yoshio, particularly known for his extremely large oeuvre of lyrics for school songs across Japan. He was one of the poets who continued to highlight the space of the theater itself, while shifting his focus away from a solitary viewing experience towards attempting to capture what it meant to become part of an audience, as we see in “At the Motion Picture Theater” (“Katsudō shashinkan de”):

まつくら暗のなかで  
 僕たちはみな 女も  
 一つの思念に集まつてゐた

何も 他のは考へない  
 僕たちはすべて 女も  
 ひとりひとりとなり だまつて  
 みんな一つの思念につながる

まつくらやみのなかで  
 とりどりに何か求めてゐた  
 一つの寂しい思念をもつて  
 なみだながらに何かを求め  
 僕たちの心は 一つところにしづまつてゐた

Within the pitch dark



We—women too—  
All congregated in a single thought

We did not think of anything else  
Everyone—women too—  
Silently one by one  
Became connected in a single thought

Within the total darkness  
We were looking for different things  
With a single lonely thought  
Tears in our eyes looking for something  
Our hearts calming in one place (Yojijima 1923)

Here, he repeatedly stresses the dark space of a screening as one in which multiple people gradually become unified to the extent that they think as one—all of them “congregate” and are “connected” in “a single thought”, tears forming in all their eyes. From this collectivity, however, a gendered division emerges. By awkwardly clarifying “women too” (*onna mo*) after each masculine plural first person pronoun (*bokutachi*), the rhetoric of inclusion seems to undermine itself by separating male and female spectators—this was, indeed, actual policy in major movie theaters in Japan themselves, which had largely gender-segregated seating until 1931 (Niita 2022, p. 309). This construction also implies surprise—that it is unusual for both men and women to be united this way in their thinking—thus presenting the cinema as particularly exceptional for this reason as well.

The focus on the collective experience of watching film resonates with the work of the early film theorist Nakai Masakazu in the subsequent decade.<sup>5</sup> Kitada Akihiro explores Nakai’s conception of mediation through film; as he notes, Nakai famously used the metaphor of being on a rowing team as a way to describe the relationship between humans and media technology, where a kind of “corporeal knowledge” that goes beyond words or conscious thought results in a group collectively laboring and, thus, “getting the hang of it” (Kitada 2010, pp. 91–92). The space of film in particular, says Kitada, was where Nakai’s “thinking of common labor” and “thinking of unmediatedness” could most easily be seen. The film audience is collective, with each individual spectator both connected deeply to what is on screen—weaving one’s self into the wider function of the film in the process of apprehending its visual language—while also “constantly confirm[ing]” the way they are doing this “via his/her relationship with other spectators” (Kitada 2010, pp. 93, 95). We might see Yojijima’s poem as an earlier poetic articulation of a similar idea: within the “single thought” created by the audience, each person is “looking for different things”, each action folded into the whole as affective intensity ripples through the crowd.

Other poets used the setting of the movie theater but not the viewing of the film itself to explore different valences of the cinematic. It is fitting to end with a work by the largely-forgotten poet Okayama Higashi (dates unknown), who in a 1923 poem set outside of the actual site of the screening—“Inside an Elegant Motion Picture Theater” (“Jōhin naru katsudō shashinkan-nai”)—combines elements of every approach discussed so far.

しづかにこーひーをすゝつてるわたしの胸の内部は  
艶失なつた西洋菓子のやうな大理石でつくられた  
脊高くひろびろしい上品な館内です  
華やかなひかりはないがおつとりと海のやうしづかで  
心配をおろした情緒はそのなかを  
あめーばのやうに觸手もやさしくおよぎまわり  
いろいろな追憶の鷗もたからかに飛びまわつてゐる

ああ そうして空のやう遠くにすくりーんがある  
 けれどもいまそこにはもうなんらのいまーじゅも寫つてゐない  
 たゞいままたごーるでんばつとの銀紙から  
 進んでゆく一道の蒼白い光茫!  
 そのいつもの貧乏の顔の大寫しのみなんです

Quietly sipping coffee, the inside of my chest  
 is made of marble, like Western sweets that have lost their sheen  
 It is an elegant interior, high-ceilinged and expansive  
 No florid lighting, but gentle and calm as the sea  
 Feeling like a weight has been taken off my mind,  
 as if swimming with gentle, amoeba-like tentacles  
 the seagulls of various memories are loudly circling  
 Ah and there's the screen, as distant as the sky  
 though no more images are being projected on it  
 But once more from the silver paper of a Golden Bat cigarette packet  
 comes forward a pale, glowing ray of light!  
 But it's only a close up of a poor man's face, as usual. (Okayama 1923)

This poem focuses not on a screening but on the space and architecture of the movie theater itself, and the class-based incongruity the narrator feels within that space. He luxuriates in his surroundings—seemingly in a café in the theater lobby—taking in the details of the interior while sipping on his coffee and entering into a reverie. He describes his own body as “made of marble”, pallid and heavy, in contrast to the lightness of the surroundings. He launches into reminiscences intermingled with ecological imagination, his mind becoming “amoeba-like” and his memories turning into “seagulls”; the blank movie screen, likely glimpsed through a doorway from the lobby, joins in as well to become the “distant sky”.

He is rudely brought back to reality, however, by seeing the reflection of his own “poor face” in “close up” (*ōutsushi*) on the foil of his cigarette packet. An unexpected cinematic moment thus ironically *interrupts* his temporary fantasy in borrowed time in the high-end movie theater. In other words, for him, the most important cinematic experience was not in the screening itself, but the time before it. The *lack* of projected images was what allowed his daydream to flourish unimpeded, until he is suddenly faced with reality again, through the momentary creation of an accidental “silver screen” in miniature, his own face projected back at him from the cigarette packet’s “silver paper”, the fantasy completely broken.

#### 4. Conclusions

The poet and fiction writer Osaki Midori wrote a series of essays in 1930 called “Eiga mansō” —*eiga* meaning “film” and *mansō* being a term she coined that means something like “rambling thoughts”—which centered an approach to writing about cinema that rejected the rigidity of film criticism of the time. In the first essay, she described *mansō* as “restless thoughts that, just like scenes on the screen, appear, disappear, and shift, resembling clouds, morning fog, mist, shadows, foam, or haze”; “I think,” she continues, “they are something very far from a transparent kind of criticism with a fixed point of view” (Osaki 1979, pp. 305–6). As early as 1911 and continuing throughout the early 1920s, we can find poets whose writing resonates with Osaki’s aims of transforming how we think and write about cinema: not treating the fleeting sensations, thoughts, and embodied experiences of filmgoing as marginal to what should be written about, but as the most central and impactful elements of a still-new and ever-changing medium that fixed forms of film writing consistently leave out.

We see this in Kitahara's poem—one of the first to use film as a metaphor, evocative precisely because it *cannot* replace memory, detailing the experience of a "kineorama" as a confluence of great feelings that leave a hollowness as the magic of the moment dissipates. We also see it in Takuboku's, in which even a "little motion picture theater" is an overwhelming experience, the film screening becoming just one element in a torrent of sensation that itself becomes the site of memory. Yamamura made use of film's status as an optical novelty, using the unique capacities of poetic text to scramble the sensorium and point towards a kind of imagery not beholden to conventional visuality. Miyazawa focused on capturing the moment *before* a kineorama show begins as the most fitting site of speculative thinking about imagination and media. Yosano goes down a garden road of conventional pastoral imagery, before taking a sharp turn and running up against a movie set, an evocation of the heightened artificiality of cinematic illusion that in turn inevitably leads us to think about poetry's capacities to create its own forms of deception and cliché. Yojima's gaze looks away from the screen towards the other audience members in the darkness of the theater, reflecting on what it means to look for "different things" but still be connected in a "single thought", although he cannot help but reinscribe gendered divisions even as he imagines a unity of feeling. Finally, Okayama creates a cinematic experience not at a screening but in the theater's café outside of it, one that is shattered by an errant reflection rudely cinematizing him, leading him to look at his own face instead of his fantasy. The cinematic, as we can see, is a powerfully generative force in these early 20th-century poems, but one that refuses to be limited to "movies" alone. Instead, the "mind's eye" must restlessly look elsewhere: towards the "purple phosphorescence" behind the curtain, or becoming a "helix", "rising to the heavens", turning away from the "blue-painted movie set", entering into the "single thought" of the audience, and always searching, perhaps, for what is flickeringly "projected on the dusk".

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Media archaeology as a methodology tends to emphasize looking at "the forgotten, the quirky, the non-obvious apparatuses, practices, and inventions"—such as the kineorama—in order to gain insight into new media forms and our relationships to media in general. (Parikka 2012, p. 2)
- <sup>2</sup> For an extensive account of these French cinepoetic experiments, see Wall-Romana (2012). For more on how they were taken up in Japan by two key figures, see Gardner (2012).
- <sup>3</sup> The technology was a favorite of a variety of prominent Japanese literary figures; for an account of the history of the kineorama and other hybrid stage/film practices in Japan, see Okubo (2010).
- <sup>4</sup> For more on the relationship between these terms, see Gerow (1994), p. 79.
- <sup>5</sup> Nakai was an influential writer who himself worked on a deliberately poetic film—a tragically lost short avant-garde documentary/fictive hybrid about Shikoku called "Poem of the Sea" ("Umi no shi") in 1932, that due to the pioneering experiments of Andō Haruzō also happened to be Japan's first full color film. (Nornes 2003, p. 143).

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