Filming industrial Japan: Kitakyushu, rise and decline of the iron town

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This paper investigates how cinema has represented the two sides of the industrial expansion and contraction process in the context of a peripheral shrinking region. It explores how the cinematic vision of regions helps one to understand the processes of spatial development that resulted from socio-economic changes. Classic and contemporary filmmakers have shown the social problems associated with industrialization as well as deindustrialization. The paper focuses on the Northern Kyushu Region in Japan, which due to its own history epitomizes the problematic that affects Japan’s peripheral territories – those outside the Pacific Industrial Belt. Through this analysis, it is argued that films can reveal aspects that other kinds of data cannot convey and, therefore, the cinematic analysis of regions has the potential to identify and reveal problems that otherwise would have remained unnoticed.

Keywords: Kitakyushu; shrinking regions; Japan; cinema; deindustrialization

Introduction

During the post-war era, Japanese authorities made economic growth an end in itself; industrial development was fostered by the government and it was assumed by the population to be a national objective. Although this brought to Japan fast economic growth, the reindustrialization resulted in environmental and social problems; those problems were exacerbated once regions deindustrialized. This paper reflects the rise and decline of Kitakyushu’s industrial region – in the northern limit of Kyushu (Figure 1) – through its cinematic representation. The region grew around the iron and steel mill opened by the government in 1901 in Yawata to aid Japan’s development as a modern nation. From the 1970s it started a process of deindustrialization and decay due in part to its peripherality.

This paper uses cinema to provide evidence of spatial changes in Japanese shrinking regions. It suggests that policy-makers can use filmic depictions to be aware of ongoing problematics that affect them due to the evocative qualities of films – which can convey aspects that other kinds of data are unable to tell, such as human stories or social issues. The relationship between cinema and cities has been approached through different lenses (e.g. Penz & Lu, 2011), yet little attention has been devoted to the use of cinema to research spatial change. We focus on two film-texts, both set in Kitakyushu. Firstly, Kinoshita Keisuke’s \textit{Kono Ten no Niji} (The Eternal Rainbow, 1958) presents the city
when the steelworks was in its production zenith, driving the region’s fast growth. Secondly, Aoyama Shinji’s *Sad Vacation* (Sad Vacation, 2007) shows the contemporary after-effects of Kitakyushu’s industrial development. Kinoshita’s depiction of the brand-new industrial social identity contrasts with Aoyama’s post-industrial wasteland. This paper first analyses Japanese shrinking regions, then overviews the history of Kitakyushu in order to explore the region through its cinematic representation. Finally, it discusses synergies between cinema and regional studies and the possible influence on policies.

**Japanese shrinking regions**

The socio-economic transformations of the interlinked processes of post-Fordism and globalization have contributed towards unequal distribution of population and economic resources. First, certain regions have become poles of global dominance where a high proportion of available assets have been concentrated; consequently, other regions have ceded those economic and population resources, starting a process of shrinkage (Cunningham-Sabot, Audirac, Fol, & Martinez-Fernandez, 2013). Second, the new geography of labour and decentralization of manufacturing production to developing countries left post-industrial regions without their economic raison d’être (Harvey, 1990). Globalization and post-Fordism are spatially manifested through four
mechanisms: suburbanization, deindustrialization, demographic ageing and political transformation (Oswalt, 2005). These usually overlap at a regional level, creating a multifaceted problematic that requires new analytical perspectives to understand contemporary processes of decline.

Japan’s strong centralized post-war administration fostered the concentration of economic activities – and therefore population – in the Tokaido Megalopolis (the metropolitan areas of Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka), starting a process of peripheralization in remaining areas. The concentration of manufacturing in the Megalopolitan region, and particularly Tokyo, increased labour demand; the young population in peripheral regions migrated to the core, laying the foundations for their future shrinkage (Mantale & Rausch, 2011). Globalization and the subsequent economic turn towards tertiary and financial activities – mostly located in Tokyo – reinforced this and triggered the decline of regional peripheral economies, creating an uneven distribution of wealth and population, and leaving them in a weaker position to confront economic and demographic changes (Fujii, 2008).

Within this context, this paper explores Japanese shrinking regions through its cinematic representations. Cinema offers a new lens with which to analyse urban development from a holistic perspective while helping to emphasize social and human aspects. Furthermore, films complement current research on shrinking regions, analysed through economic data or spatial form, by that focus on human aspects. Through connecting film analysis with urban studies, we stress the debates between specialized disciplines, and their popular and cultural response. Film analysis allows us to shape and identify the formation of filmic space as a metaphor of urban fabric, and its reality as a psychological space where characters confront industrial and post-industrial issues.

**History of Northern Kyushu Industrial Region**

Japan was a latecomer to the Industrial Revolution; at the end of the 19th century it lacked any significant steelworks (Shimizu, 2010). Moreover, the government believed a strong industrial base would protect Japan from Western colonial powers, resulting in the *fukoku kyouhei* policy (‘rich country, strong army’), fostering active government participation in industrial development (Yamamura, 1997). Given its easy access to raw materials – near coalfields and marine access to China’s iron ore – the small fishing village of Yawata was designated to house the nation’s main steelworks: the central node of Japanese industrialization during the early 20th century (Shapira, 1994).

The mill fostered the parallel rise of subsidiary industries that created a broader industrial base, with further development of heavy and chemical manufacturing (Figure 2). This brought economic benefits to Yawata and surrounding towns, and population increases from new job opportunities; the growth of essential services, however, could not keep pace (Shimizu, 2010). The wars and occupations of the early 20th century increased demand for iron and steel from Northern Kyushu; it became one of Japan’s four major industrial zones (Fujimori, 1980). However, after the Second World War, Japanese cities were in ruins. Post-war reconstruction started with the Allied Occupation; the Korean War stimulated the resurgence of manufacturing industries thanks to US demand for weapons and supplies (Cobbing, 2009). This also helped Yawata, with the steelworks as the driver of its recovery, again placing the region as a prime manufacturing area.

During the 1970s, the importance of manufacturing in Northern Kyushu started to decline. The relocation of regional primary economic functions to Tokaido prompted
population and economic shrinkage throughout Japan’s peripherality (Mantale & Rausch, 2011). In Kitakyushu’s case, the steelworks’ downsizing – due to the move of facilities to Tokyo – affected the region’s whole economic fabric, with job losses and outmigration (Shapira, 1994). Thus, the experience of Northern Kyushu Industrial Region is typical of many other peripheral areas of Japan: economic and population decline caused by the empowerment of Tokyo.

During the rapid industrial growth period, the core cities of Northern Kyushu – Yawata, Kokura, Moji, Wakamatsu and Tobata – developed as a functional and economically dependent region; its local authorities, however, were uncoordinated and lacked the political mechanisms to develop joint plans to tackle regional economic decline. Due to the weak bureaucratic capabilities of Japanese regions, the five cities merged into a single local authority in 1963 (Oda, 1979), to gain political power and ‘promote their mutual interests as a modern industrial city with an important port’ (Feldman, 2008, p. 225). Each of the five cities became wards of the newly created Kitakyushu City; an industrial region effectively became an industrial city (Figure 3). Kitakyushu still functions as a polynuclear region, with activity centres in every ward, but its new ‘city’ status allows it to adopt integrated measures for its long-lasting problems.

A cinematic view of Kitakyushu

The two films that structure our cinematic analysis of Kitakyushu focus on the social processes triggered by industrialization. First, The Eternal Rainbow tells the story of the
daily struggles of Yawata millworkers; second, Sad Vacation focus on the feelings of orphanhood and solitude that appear in the post-industrial generation. Yet, in both films the fate of the mill and its effects on society are reflected in the story’s development.

Figure 3. Conurbation process of the Northern Kyushu region, 1900–2014. Source: Based on Yamaguchi (1976) and Google Earth.
Kinoshita’s film is set just after the Korean War and depicts the city at the peak of its industrial power. The company started a series of improvement plans and expansions to increase productivity (Kagami, 2007). Yawata is depicted similarly to the industrial city described by Mumford (1961, p. 446) as ‘dark hives, busily puffing, clanking, screeching, smoking for twelve and fourteen hours, sometimes going around the clock’. Its documentary-like treatment encodes a public social space around Yawata’s industrial landscape in a blend of subliminal criticism and compassion.

The director introduces Yawata’s industrial environment: aerial long-shots of the urban landscape are followed by a detailed explanation of the mills and their operation. The narrator’s description of amenities and surroundings feels like a promotional video. Through the routines and struggles of the mill worker’s daily life, we witness the rise of modern industrial regions. The ‘smoke of seven colours’ is a constant presence in the sky representing progress brought by industrialization, but also the early signs of environmental degradation problems that marked future regional development (Figure 4).

The Eternal Rainbow conveys what Lipietz (1994, p. 342) called the three pillars of the Fordist model: ‘technical progress’ (highlighted during the film’s documentary pauses); ‘social progress’ (the characters’ hopes for a better future thanks to their work in the steel mill); and ‘state progress’ (the mill and its workers support Japan’s development). It shows an industrial city populated by characters hoping for a better future but trapped in the social system of capitalist production. Guy Debord (Debord, 1994, pp. 122–123) notes that ‘at the core of these conditions we naturally find an authoritarian decision-making process that abstractly develops any environment into an environment of abstraction’. This can relate to both the physical and the social fabric of

Figure 4. Kitakyushu seen from the Blast Furnace Park.
the city. Ultimately, the abstract idea of industrial development for its own sake prevents the city finding alternative sources to enable future growth and development. Close reading of *The Eternal Rainbow* foresees many of the problems that subsequently affected Kitakyushu.

The region has common characteristics with other Japanese industrial areas. A single industry and/or a single company (steel and Yawata Steel Works) control the city. The film shows how the steelworks regulates life at all levels, not only the economy: supermarkets, leisure activities or housing depended on Yawata Steel Works. The model’s weakness is that once the company’s interest changes, the region is abandoned, while company dependency results in an underdeveloped regional economic fabric, with most activities relying on that corporation. These ‘company towns’ (Fujii, 2008) have experienced decline in different forms since the 1970s, especially in Japan’s peripherality.

Despite those efforts, Kitakyushu underwent a post-Fordist transformation from one of Japan’s main industrial regions to a secondary position, bypassed by flows of capital and world financial markets (Graham & Marvin, 2001). Our second film-text, Aoyama’s *Sad Vacation*, is structured around the social consequences of transformation to a new model of production, showing ‘the postfordist industrial metropolis as inherently a magnifier of social and spatial inequalities’ (Soja, 2000, p. 174). The film shows the contemporary after-effects of Kitakyushu’s industrial development. Similar to Kinoshita’s film, *Saddo Bakêshon* opens with an aerial view of Kitakyushu, but a landscape of abandoned warehouses and factories rather than a bustling city with mills working at full capacity. This is the result of the region’s economic transformation: ‘the production of spaces of ruination and dereliction are an inevitable result of capitalist development and the relentless search for profit’ (Edensor, 2005, p. 5). Those ruins epitomize the economic decay of the area and its shift towards peripherality.

*Saddo Bakêshon* focuses on the social consequences derived from the economic restructuring of capital. It shows the region once it has already decayed, portraying characters facing employment problems and situations of certain deprivation, the result of Kitakyushu’s deindustrialization. From the 1980s, the city introduced a number of initiatives to improve economic performance, but these urban regeneration measures appear not to have benefited the characters.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Through the filmic analysis of Kitakyushu, we have seen that Kinoshita’s depiction was already warning about the future social and environmental consequences of industrial development. The ‘smoke of seven colours’ is the precursor of the region’s environmental degradation. Critically reading *Kono Ten no Niji* could have helped to anticipate the measures that were put into practice from the 1970s to restore the city’s environment; besides, that anticipation would have ameliorated the damage. Equally, *Saddo Bakêshon* can work as a warning of the limited reach of the urban regeneration policies put into practice by the local authorities to relaunch Kitakyushu’s economy. We would argue that through film analysis it is possible to highlight regional spatial development issues.

Our two film-texts thus convey Kitakyushu in two different historical moments. Kinoshita’s film is set when the steelworks was expanding its production facilities and workers moved to the region looking for better opportunities, epitomizing the Fordist mode of capitalist production. On the other hand, Aoyama’s Kitakyushu is undergoing economic decline. Instead of smoking chimneys and bustling factories, we see ruined warehouses and abandoned factories, reflecting the societal effects of the change from
an industrial to a post-industrial society; as Lipietz (1994, p. 344) asks, ‘[what] if the social consequences [of this transformation] are unfavourable? Too bad’. The city and its inhabitants are suffering the after-effects of its previous uncontrolled development, and the broken promises of progress and a better life made by industrial development.

Based on our analysis, rather than focusing on new physical and economic development the city should consider social problems of integration and inequality as their main policy objectives regarding regeneration, i.e. to focus on those unfavourable social consequences. Therefore, Kitakyushu should implement reintegration programmes that will prepare the population for the current necessities of the labour market.

The evocative qualities of films, if closely analysed by focusing on issues of spatial development, can help policy-makers to understand better regional issues and challenges. Films can illuminate aspects that other kind of surveys or official statistics (e.g. gross domestic product (GDP) or population change) cannot capture – the residents’ mood, the social consequences of development, the human stories behind economic restructuring processes – or even reveal previously unnoticed situations. While a director’s vision may be biased towards particular concerns, it nevertheless will reflect the socio-economic reality of a place and a time. Furthermore, analysing films from different periods allows studying the evolution of both the region and changing societal issues.

Films can lead to changes in policy or at least to greater public awareness of social problems. In Japan, the response by filmmakers to the Fukushima earthquake and consequent nuclear disaster has helped to show the magnitude of the event and to raise awareness about the aftermath. Shion Sono’s Kibô no Kuni (The Land of Hope, 2012) or Ryôichi Kimizuka’s Itai Asu e no Tôkakan (Reunion, 2012) both present life after the disaster and its emotional consequences. Kimizuka tells the story of a former funeral house director aiding people to cope with the deaths of family and friends. Sono’s film detaches itself from the direct loses caused by the earthquake to focus on the repercussions of the nuclear meltdown, questioning whether the risk is worth it. Although there is no evidence that these films have affected Japanese policies, they have contributed to the ongoing debate on nuclear energy in Japanese society.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes
1. For the trailer, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77hiXcUP7Ak/.
2. The film opens with an aerial view of Kitakyushu: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_jreRg1DQ/.
3. Yawata’s population in 1901 was 6652 and grew to 84,682 in 1917 (Shimizu, 2010).
4. Under the 1947 Local Autonomy Laws (LAL), cities with a population over 1 million had enhanced powers. The new Kitakyushu City gained the status of Seirei Shitei Toshi – Government Ordinance Designated Cities (Jacobs, 2011).

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