This paper discusses the production, distribution, and reception of an early sound documentary film, *Big Tokyo*, directed 1932-1933 by prominent Soviet filmmaker Vladimir Shneiderov. *Big Tokyo* was the first Soviet picture filmed in Japan, as well as one of the first Soviet “talkies.” The film’s soundtrack, however, was recorded in Moscow under the direction of prominent Japanese musician Yamada Kōsaku. The filming process itself was financially supported and coordinated by *Tokyo Asahi*, one of the biggest newspapers in Japan. Thus, when the film was released in Japan, it was advertised as a co-production between *Tokyo Asahi* and the Soviet film studio Mezhrabpomfilm.

The early 1930s was a transitional period for both Japan and the Soviet Union, in their diplomatic relations as well as their film industries (conversion to sound). Radical changes that shook political, social, and cultural life in both countries had an indisputable effect on cinematic style, ideological content, and the use of sound in *Big Tokyo*. Despite the film’s unique status, it has garnered scholars’ attention only rarely. This might partially be explained by the fact that, in Japan, the film of *Big Tokyo* was long considered lost.¹ Yet, I have verified that at least one copy of *Big Tokyo* is stored at RGAKFD (The Russian State Documentary Film & Photo Archive of Krasnogorsk), a few kilometers outside of Moscow. This copy has Russian narration and subtitles, and was presumably screened for Soviet audiences. According to Shneiderov, there also existed a Japanese version of the film. The whereabouts of the “Japanese copy,” however, have yet to be determined, so this paper will conduct an analysis of *Big Tokyo* based on a close examination of the “Russian copy” stored at RGAKFD, as well as of Soviet and Japanese reviews published after the film’s release.
Tokyo Asahi had followed the production of Big Tokyo emphatically from its very first steps, publishing interviews with the Soviet filmmakers and Yamada Kōsaku, as well as releasing detailed accounts of the film’s production process. However, when Japanese audiences finally saw the film, public excitement dropped immediately. Apart from a negative review published in Eiga Hyōron, a piece in Phototaimusu, and a short notice in Kokusai Eiga Shinbun, the premiere of the first Soviet-Japanese co-production film went by virtually unnoticed. Kokusai Eiga Shinbun maintained that, despite filmgoers’ high expectations, Big Tokyo was “a typical foreign film that exposed the filmmakers’ lack of knowledge and understanding of Japanese culture.” Could this truly be the reason why Big Tokyo was so promptly ignored? Did the Japanese audiences’ disappointment have anything to do with the differences that existed between the two film versions? By examining the historical context of both Soviet and Japanese cinema, as well as the technical and political changes that occurred in the early 1930s, we can begin to understand why this international project, so promising at first, turned out to be a failure. Archival materials from RGALI (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) and GARF (the State Archive of Russian Federation), as well as Japanese and Soviet periodicals issued in the 1920s and 30s, reveal what sort of expectations Japanese intellectuals had toward Soviet cinema’s use of sound, and how these expectations were verified (or contradicted) in the course of making Big Tokyo.

1. Soviet Filmmakers Go to Japan:

In 1932, documentary filmmaker Vladimir Shneiderov and his film crew were aboard the Soviet icebreaker “Sibiriakov,” shooting a polar expedition led by celebrated Soviet scientist Otto Schmidt. Sibiriakov had left Arkhangelsk in June, but by September, the icebreaker’s propeller shaft had been seriously damaged. Despite this interruption, the expedition continued, and Sibiriakov became the first icebreaker to cross the Northern Sea Route in a single navigation. Surprisingly, even though the ship was in desperate need of repairs, it did not stop at Vladivostok – or anywhere else in the Soviet Union – but continued its journey until November 4, 1932, when it finally entered the port of Yokohama in Japan. According to Shneiderov, the icebreaker’s
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stop in Japan was unplanned, and so was the following production of Big Tokyo. But was this really the case? It is likely that this trip was ultimately motivated not only by the Party’s desire to explore the Northern Sea, but also by the unstable political situation developing in the Far East.

After the Manchurian Incident, Soviet leaders could not ignore Japan’s military success in northeastern China, and offered Japan a nonaggression treaty in order to prevent armed conflict in the future. When Shneiderov and his film crew arrived in Yokohama, the Japanese government was in the process of considering whether to accept the Soviet Union’s proposal. Thus, it would be logical to assume that the Soviet expedition was assigned the “special” task of rousing public opinion to influence Japan’s decision about the nonaggression pact. The co-production of a sound documentary film was a perfect opportunity to attract the media and strengthen the cultural bond between the two countries.

According to Tokyo Asahi, as soon as the Russians arrived in Yokohama, they began to sing and play their guitars and balalaikas. This information was accompanied by a photograph of Russian sailors with their musical instruments. Obviously, this was a well-prepared performance designed to attract the Japanese media by presenting an amicable, peaceful image of the USSR. In an attempt to gain publicity, members of the Soviet expedition delivered several public lectures and displayed a special exhibition of sketches and photographs collected throughout the trip. As another “friendly gesture,” the expedition presented the Imperial Ueno Zoo with a polar bear they captured on their way through the Arctic Sea.

The icebreaker’s film crew also received their share of media attention due to the privileged status of one of its members. The Soviet film crew consisted of four people: the film director (Shneiderov), two assistants (Kuper and Muhanov), and a cameraman (Mark Trojanovskii), whose uncle was none other than Aleksandr Trojanovskii, the Soviet ambassador to Japan (1927-1933). When he joined the polar expedition, Mark Trojanovskii was a young graduate of VGIK (Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography), with no actual filmmaking experience. Nevertheless, it was he who seized the opportunity to shoot the first-ever Soviet documentary film about Japan. Was this a mere coincidence? Or was the icebreaker’s sudden arrival in Japan planned in advance? Regardless, virtually all of Big Tokyo’s shoots were organized with
impressive dispatch, within only a few weeks after the ship’s arrival. On November 7, negotiations began regarding the co-production of a film. On November 13, all parties signed the official contract, and filming took place at the end of November.

Several newspapers had expressed their interest in collaborating with the Soviet team. Tokyo Nichi Nichi was the first to act, producing a short newsreel (600-700 meters) edited by the Soviet filmmakers from the film footage they acquired during the expedition. Tokyo Asahi, however, went further and suggested the Soviet filmmakers produce a documentary about Japan. Even before the Soviet filmmakers’ arrival, Tokyo Asahi was already actively involved in constructing and promoting the visual image of a modernized Japan. In 1932, just three months prior to Shneiderov’s arrival, the newspaper published a photograph collection entitled Japan: A Pictorial Interpretation in order to introduce the country to readers abroad. In this album, pictures of Japan taken by Tokyo Asahi cameramen ran alongside explanatory comments in English and French written by Australian historian George Caiger. As advertised, the album depicted Japan not as a country of “Fujiyama, geisha girls, and harakiri,” but rather revealed it as a modern country that had made a “dignified debut to the international scene.” Soviet filmmakers were expected to produce a similar image of Japan – on film. In the 1930s, the Japanese media sought ways to restore the country’s image, which had been seriously damaged by the Manchurian Incident. A co-production with Soviet documentary filmmakers was seen as a suitable and highly promising affair.

2. The Premise of Realism – Soviet Cinema in Prewar Japan

Tokyo Asahi’s co-production project was not the first attempt made by the Japanese to collaborate with Soviet filmmakers. In 1931, the Shochiku film studio tried inviting Vsevolod Pudovkin to shoot a documentary film about Japan for international distribution. Pudovkin had made only one documentary (his debut work, Mechanics of the Brain, Mekhanika golovnogo mozga, 1926), and was much more famous for his feature films and acting career. In spite of this, he was supposed to shoot a documentary that would “introduce Japanese culture to the West.” Although Pudovkin’s visit to Japan was never
realized, the mere attempt to conduct such a cultural project reflects both Japanese filmmakers’ strong desire to export their culture abroad and their recognition of Soviet filmmakers as suitable candidates (mediators) to be entrusted with such a mission.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Japanese audiences perceived Soviet cinema as highly realistic and skilled in depicting Asia. Such impressions arose largely from the style and content of Soviet films shown in Japan. From 1930 to 1932, when Soviet cinema reached the peak of its popularity in prewar Japan, almost all of the Soviet films released in Japanese theaters were documentaries. Many of these were travelogues that portrayed distant lands and exotic places, often located in Asia. The most influential Soviet travelogue and arguably the most influential Soviet film released in prewar Japan was Victor Turin’s *Turksib (Turksib, Turukushibu, 1929)*, depicting the construction of the Turkestan-Siberia Railway and the subsequent rapid modernization of the Soviet East. Soviet filmmakers’ aspirations to depict a powerful, rising Asia were not limited to documentaries. The two most prominent Soviet feature films released on Japanese screens despite severe anti-communist censorship were Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *Storm Over Asia (Potomok Chingiskhana, Ajia no arashi, 1928)* and *The Road to Life (Putiovka v zhizn’, Jinsei annai, 1931)*, which both portray positive heroes played by Asian actors.

When shooting travelogues, Soviet filmmakers often chose places inaccessible to foreign filmmakers for geographical and various diplomatic reasons, and thus were able to produce previously unseen, rare footage that was considered “realistic.” Vladimir Erofeev’s *Afghanistan (Afganistan, 1929)*, for instance, became a box-office hit in Germany, and prompted one of the most influential liberal German newspapers, *Berliner Tageblatt*, to assert that, in contrast with other exotic films like *Chang* (directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack in 1927) and *Simba: King of the Beasts* (directed by Martin and Osa Johnson in 1928), which gained success because of their “romanticism,” “the Russians were the first to show the East realistically.” The newspaper also added that this was probably because the Russians were geographically and psychologically “closer to the East.” Thus, many critics who perceived that Soviet travelogues were “realistic” attributed this quality to Russia’s (and the Soviet Union’s) innate Asian identity.
Among the admirers of Soviet “realism” were also viewers who stressed the importance of the Marxist ideology under which the Soviet films were created, which (at least theoretically) opposed all sorts of national and racial discrimination. In Japan, the concept of “proletarian realism,” proposed by leading Marxist theoretician Kurahara Korehito, was particularly influential. Proletarian realism urged its followers to put art in the use of the proletarian class struggle. In order to achieve this, Kurahara proposed that authors should “look at the world with ‘the eyes’ of the proletarian vanguard” and portray it “with the attitude of a strict realist.” Kurahara’s proposal had a deep and long-lasting impact on Japanese left-wing intellectuals’ understanding of realism and their perception of Soviet cinema. Proletarian writer Hirabayashi Taiko provides a good example of this in her short review of *Turksib*.

According to Hirabayashi, *Turksib*’s strength lies in its “truthful” representation of reality. This truthfulness, she states, can only be attained in the Soviet Union, because the Soviet filmmakers have the correct understanding of their environment. That is, they have the appropriate ideology – communism. As an adherent of Marxist thought, Hirabayashi considers a worldview reliant on the concepts of class division and class struggle both true and appropriate. She continues by pointing out the flaws of contemporary Japanese cinema, which lacks the ability to see the “truth” (*jijitsu*), and therefore blindly follows the West. She says that Japanese actors look comical when they adopt western gestures, and that movies like *Turksib* must teach Japanese filmmakers to draw inspiration from traditional Japanese theater and lifestyle. Hirabayashi sees *Turksib* not only as a realistic form of art, but also as a model of resisting the West and forging Japan’s own national identity.

Of course, not all Japanese intellectuals shared Hirabayashi’s utter fascination with Soviet cinema’s ideological appeal. Back in the early 1930s, some Japanese critics did point to *Turksib*’s imperialistic element. Chiyota Shimizu, for instance, declares that what makes *Turksib* a truly “Soviet” film is its “unconcealed propaganda persistent throughout the whole movie.” He asserts that Viktor Turin’s greatest achievement is the “ingenious camouflage” of the Soviet Union’s “imperialistic policy – the policy of aggression towards the East,” conveyed in the name of the “cultural development of Central Asia.” In the end, however, Shimizu recognizes *Turksib* as a “favorable
model of film propaganda,” attributes its success to Turin’s mastery of montage technique, and urges “everyone who is interested in cinema” to go watch it.\textsuperscript{15}

The propagandistic quality of Soviet documentary films appealed to a broad variety of viewers with sometimes opposing ideological views. As Shochiku film studio’s plans to invite Pudovkin to Japan and \textit{Tokyo Asahi’s} enthusiastic attitude toward collaborating with Shneiderov reveal, Japanese intellectuals were not only interested in watching Soviet cinema, but were also intrigued by the possibility of actually applying its documentary techniques to their own filmmaking and film export. Soviet cinema’s close ties with foreign distributors (both Pudovkin and Shneiderov were working on Mezhrabpomfilm, a studio co-founded by the Soviet Union and Germany) were regarded as an advantage that could be used to support the export of “authentic” and “realistic” images of Japan via cinema. The sudden arrival of a Soviet icebreaker and its film crew provided Japanese intellectuals with an opportunity to explore whether the “Soviet approach” (Marxist ideology, innovative montage techniques, pursuit of realism) would remain so appealing when actually transplanted onto Japanese soil.

3. Image of Tokyo / Sound of Moscow

\textit{Big Tokyo} was shot entirely on film supplied by \textit{Tokyo Asahi}. Soviet filmmakers were also provided with a consultant and an interpreter.\textsuperscript{16} Even under the protection of one of the biggest newspapers in Japan, however, the Soviet filmmakers were not allowed to move around and shoot freely. As Shneiderov recalled, he was told Osaka was “too dangerous” and they might be “offended by fascists.” The factories would allegedly be too hard to shoot because they had “too much smoke,” and the countryside would simply “smell too bad.”\textsuperscript{17} Thus, Shneiderov could set up his camera only in the most pristine, touristic places. Additionally, the film crew was constantly followed by the special secret police (\textit{tokkō}). The Soviet filmmakers were able to shoot the port of Yokohama, the rural landscape between Yokohama and Tokyo, the Soviet embassy, some historical sites at Nikkō, Ginza street, Tokyo station, the Asakusa district, and even the Meiji Seika confectionery factory. However, the version of \textit{Big Tokyo} stored at Krasnogorsk plainly suggests
that Shneiderov did not have the time or mobility to film enough footage for a full-length documentary. Several scenes (for instance, the ones featuring Ginza) are repeated multiple times in a transparent effort to prolong the film.

Still, Yamada Kōsaku, who saw the footage of *Big Tokyo* in Moscow before sound was added, seemed generally pleased with these images collected by Shneiderov. According to Yamada, unlike other westerners who tend to see Japan as a country of “poems, flowers, and parasols,” the Soviet filmmakers tried to capture “the real” Japan – a prospering and powerful nation with wide roads and new modern buildings. Judging from the lack of easily attainable images of Mount Fuji, *torii* gates, and castle towers, Yamada concludes that the Soviet filmmakers were “deliberately avoiding unusual sceneries that would create an exotic image of Japan.”\(^{18}\) Yet again, a Japanese intellectual was praising the “realistic” qualities of Soviet cinema.

In the same article, Yamada maintains that Shneiderov depicts Japan realistically by emphasizing its contrasts through editing – i.e. he compares geishas with Japanese “flappers,” or *moga* (modern girls), and juxtaposes old-style wooden houses with multistoried modern buildings. The “comparative” approach in itself is less than novel, and by the early 1930s, it was widely employed in all sorts of visual media. In fact, it is the main principle under which the photographs are edited in *Japan: A Pictorial Interpretation*, the photograph album published by *Tokyo Asahi* a few months prior to Shneiderov’s arrival. The album also emphasizes the co-existence of traditional and modern (Western) architecture, costume, and design in contemporary Japan. Viewing Shneiderov’s film, one cannot help but notice its striking similarities with the photographs published by *Tokyo Asahi*. Unusual and exotic images of Tokyo appear in the Soviet film just as in the Japanese photographs: a woman singlehandedly removing a traditional Japanese *shoji* sliding door, trees carried around the streets of Tokyo on special carts for replanting, a *chindon’ya* (Japanese marching band), the Soviet Embassy in Tokyo, mighty Japanese proletarians staring into the screen. One might interpret such scenes as a reflection of a foreign and even a highly pronounced “Soviet” gaze. Yet, all of these scenes had been previously captured by the Japanese photographers. At least on the visual level, Shneiderov seems to have followed the instructions from *Tokyo Asahi* and created an image of Japan similar to the one presented in *Japan: A Pictorial*.
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Interpretation.

Perhaps Big Tokyo’s only deviation from the ideal image of Japan promulgated by Tokyo Asahi is its portrayal of working women. While Japan continued to propagate an image of its women as feminine and fragile throughout the 1930s and 40s, in Shneiderov’s film we see young girls working at the confectionery factory, sturdy women working at a construction site, female shop owners, adolescents and elderly women taking care of small children, etc. As a filmmaker from a socialist state that officially declared gender equality from the first days of its existence, Shneiderov could not leave Japanese women behind. Big Tokyo’s portrayal of women did cause discontent among Japanese viewers, and one reviewer even called the characters at a construction site “women who look like men.” Yet, it is difficult to imagine that scenes like these were the sole factor responsible for Shneiderov becoming an exemplar in the Japanese media of Soviet filmmakers’ “lack of knowledge and understanding of Japanese culture.” As we shall see, the Japanese viewers’ disappointment in Soviet realism was mainly caused by Big Tokyo’s use of sound, and not by its visual imagery.

In 1927, the world’s first feature-length film with synchronized dialogue sequences, The Jazz Singer, was released, and by mid-1932, the conversion to sound in the United States was virtually complete. In both Japan and the Soviet Union, however, this transition proceeded slowly. The first technically and commercially successful “talkies” appeared in both countries only in 1931. In 1928, Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov had already signed the famous “Statement on Sound” calling for a “contrapuntal” use of sound that would not simply duplicate the image, but would instead contrast or rebut it. The “Statement” was immediately translated into several languages, making a significant impact on filmmakers worldwide. But when it came to actually putting the theory into practice, the Soviet Union was clearly falling behind. Japan’s conversion to synchronized sound was also a very slow and painful process. “Silent” cinema continued to exist there until the early 1940s. This was not only because of financial and technical problems, but was also as a consequence of numerous strikes organized by benshi and gakushi (commentators and musicians who accompanied silent film screenings), who
were determined to keep their jobs.23

One of the chief motivations behind the co-production of Big Tokyo was Japan and the Soviet Union’s mutual desire to learn from each other’s experience of mastering sound.24 A cultural mediator between the two countries emerged in Yamada Kōsaku (1886 - 1965), a prominent Japanese composer and conductor, who had prior experience in working with film sound. After studying at Tokyo Music School and Berlin Musikhochschule, Yamada Kōsaku became known as a founder of the first Symphony Orchestra25 in Japan, the first conductor to perform orchestral Japanese music in the West, and an enthusiastic adherent of incorporating “traditional” Japanese tunes and musical instruments into classical Western-style music performances. Yamada’s orchestra began to accompany silent film screenings in major Tokyo film theaters as early as the mid-1920s. In 1927, he was invited by Osanai Kaoru, the leading figure of modern Japanese theater, to participate in the experimental production of a talkie film, Daylight (Reimei). In 1932, a few months prior to the arrival of the Soviet icebreaker, Yamada wrote music for a sound propaganda film The Dawn of Manchuria and Mongolia (Manmō kenkoku no reimei), directed by Mizoguchi Kenji. In addition to his experience in sound recording, by the early 1930s, Yamada Kōsaku had already established an international reputation as a conductor and composer. He had visited the Soviet Union twice, and was well known by the Soviet authorities26 – two factors that made him a perfect candidate for participating in the making of Big Tokyo.

Yamada arrived in Moscow in April 1933 and was initially determined to compose new melodies for Shneiderov’s film. The Soviet staff, however, convinced him that choosing some tunes from his existing work would be sufficient. Thus, Yamada mostly relied on Mōchō (Blind Bird), a music score written for Nakamura Fukusuke, a Kabuki actor looking for new ways to modify traditional Japanese dance. Yamada also chose several songs from his opera Ayame (1931), including Hakone Magouta (The Song of Hakone Packhorse Drivers), which he used to accompany the images of rural Japan depicted in Big Tokyo. All of the music chosen by Yamada Kōsaku had a strong “Japanese” accent and required traditional musical instruments, which were not always easy to find in Soviet Moscow. Several times, Yamada had to replace Japanese instruments with European ones. He also found himself
teaching Mezhrabpomfilm’s vocalists some basic language skills so that they could sing in Japanese. These lessons, however, did not pay off, and the “traditional” Japanese songs performed in *Big Tokyo* sound unnatural, to say the least. This is supported by a review published in *Phototaimusu*, which complains that the *Yoitomake* (a chorus tune sung by Japanese workers on a construction site) performed in *Big Tokyo* too closely resembles European music. To compensate for the lack of native Japanese speakers when recording the sounds of radio calisthenics (a warm up highly popular in Japan – *rajio taisō*), Yamada had to imitate the broadcaster’s voice himself, calling out: “one, two, three, four…!”

After his return to Japan, Yamada admitted that the Soviet sound recording system was far less advanced then he had imagined. Nevertheless, he concluded that his work in Moscow had been both interesting and delightful. These words, however, were written before Yamada actually saw the premiere of *Big Toyko*, which turned out to be different from what he expected to see and to hear. In his article published in *Tokyo Asahi*, Yamada maintains that in the film’s opening, he declined the Soviet staff’s suggestion to use his lyrical music. Instead, he decided to use the melodious sound of a Japanese temple bell and the industrial sound of a factory siren. By combining these two at the outset of the film, Yamada wanted to represent the coexistence of the old and the new in contemporary Japan. According to Yamada, this sound editing was apparently welcomed by the Soviet filmmakers. However, the copy of *Big Tokyo* stored at RGAKFD begins with a cheerful jazz tune followed by an introduction of a peculiar film character: the mask.

4. Who Are You Behind The Mask?

The opening scene of Sheniderov’s “documentary” starts with a medium long shot of a caricatured Japanese standing on a theater stage. Using a mixture of Russian and broken Japanese (“Welcome to Japan” or ‘*Nihon ni gozaimasu irasshai!*’ as the Japanese would say”), he urges us to “take out the cameras” and get “ready to shoot Japan.” After his introductory talk, the commentator, played by actor Nikolai Mologin, disappears. However, his catchy voiceover continues to guide viewers throughout the entire film,
suggesting how they should perceive and interpret certain scenes so as to
conform to a correct, Soviet way. When we see the alluring images of a big,
modernized city, the voiceover tries to bring our attention to its essentially
“feudalistic” nature by asserting that “contemporary Japan is a mix of
America and the Middle Ages.” In order to emphasize the unevenness of
Japanese modernization, rural sceneries are accompanied by the following:
“The countryside has electricity, but the land owned by peasants is very
small. People have to work with their hands. Fields are narrow, like small
kaleyards. A tractor won’t be able to turn here.” This comment suggests the
extent to which Japanese peasants stood to benefit from Soviet-style
collectivization that would give them broad lands easily cultivable by
machines. When we see a traditional Japanese house and a silhouette of a
kimono-clad woman, the narrator is quick to conclude that she is an
oppressed housewife burdened with domestic chores. He even interprets a
melancholic song that the subject has allegedly performed: “Red onions,
white carrots, and the lady saucepan. All day long and all my life I spend in
the kitchen…”

The character of a “Japanese” commentator was probably inspired by
Shneiderov’s experience in Japanese film theaters. As is widely known,
Japanese silent cinema was traditionally accompanied by the narrative
performances of special commentators called benshi or katsuben. Sitting in
the theater near the screen, they explained the films’ content and historical
background and vocally portrayed the characters.29 The practice of katsuben
was well-known in the USSR,30 and its influence is clearly felt in the
dramaturgy of Big Tokyo. Shneiderov’s interpretation of katsuben, however,
did not exactly follow the conventions existing in 1932. By the time
Shneiderov arrived in Japan and actually experienced katsuben, the tradition
of maesetsu (when benshi appeared in front of the audience prior to film
screenings and made detailed introductory remarks) was already obsolete,
and benshi were trying to make comments without being seen by the
audience.31 For Shneiderov, however, it was important to link the eloquent
voice of the narrator to the visual image of a Japanese caricature. The
personified commentator (a Soviet actor wearing a Japanese mask) positions
himself between the two cultures – or rather, he belongs to neither Japan nor
Russia. He pretends to be Japanese, but his use of Japanese grammar is
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blatantly incorrect; his Russian pronunciation is perfect, but the way he stresses certain words and uses overly polite language indicates his foreignness. “The mask” is the person who invites us to Japan and teaches us everything about this country, but there are also scenes where he refers to himself as “we, the Soviets.” Throughout the entire film, it is unclear what nationality he is, and, indeed, what “side” he is on.

The “mask” character is endowed with ambiguity in order to avoid one-sided political statements. In 1933, Soviet-Japanese relations entered a transitional phase, moving from “possibly becoming allies” to “possibly becoming enemies,” and Soviet filmmakers had to be particularly careful not to contradict the Party’s official diplomatic policy. The political atmosphere of early 1933 did not yet allow Soviet filmmakers to depict Japan as an “enemy,” but it did encourage them to parody and criticize Japan in an “ironic” way. This is exactly what the “mask” character does. In the first half of the twentieth century, the practice of racial impersonation (Caucasian actors playing African-American or Asian characters) was still fairly common in both theater and cinema, giving rise to such terms as “blackface” and “yellowface.” Even the world’s first “talkie,” The Jazz Singer, tells the story of a young immigrant from a conservative Jewish family becoming a blackface singer. As one of the first Soviet sound films, Big Tokyo incorporates both the racial impersonation and the use of jazz music employed in the “prototype” of all “talkies.”

The image of a Japanese commentator portrayed in Big Tokyo is radically different from the depiction of Asian characters in other Soviet films released in prewar Japan (Turksib, Storm Over Asia, Road to Life, etc.). The mask’s caricatured appearance and his caustic remarks about the “Americanized” Japanese architecture, severe unemployment, and miserable lives of Japanese women are clearly politically incorrect. His comments, however, were not addressed to Japanese audiences. According to Shneiderov, the Japanese copy of his film did not have voiceover narration.32 We can also assume that the Japanese version was shorter, because even though the copy stored at RGAKFD consists of five parts, Big Tokyo was advertised as a documentary made of only four parts upon its Japanese release. Thus, it is likely that the opening scene with the caricatured Japanese commentator is missing in the Japanese version. Furthermore, the Japanese press makes no references to
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this opening scene, which only increases the likelihood that the copy stored at RGAKFD was screened only for Soviet audiences. The Japanese audiences’ disappointment was not caused by the mask’s caricatured appearance and biting comments. In fact, it was precisely the lack of voiceover that made the Japanese version of Big Tokyo’s soundtrack too plain and unsatisfying. After all, Mezhrabpomfilm and Tokyo Asahi had given their Japanese audience “a talkie” that did not talk.

5. The Impossibility of “Talkie Realism”

According to a review published in Eiga Hyōron, the author’s biggest disappointment regarding Big Tokyo was its inexpressive and unoriginal use of sound. Yamada Kōsaku’s participation in the making of Big Tokyo was “advertised with a great deal of fanfare,” but unfortunately, when the film was released, his work received harsh criticism: “It is utterly intolerable that every time we see an urban scene, we hear Ginza no yanagi... I was all the more disappointed because I expected Yamada’s work to be more sophisticated and refined.”33 Indeed, Big Tokyo employs popular songs such as Tokyo Kōshinkyoku (“Tokyo March,” also known as Ginza no yanagi, or “Willows of Ginza”) and Watashi no aozora (“My Blue Heaven”), which are repeated over and over again. However, we should not be too quick to blame Yamada Kōsaku for this. As mentioned above, there is evidence that the film’s music score was altered from the version initially intended by Yamada, and it is quite possible that the extensive use of “light” music was introduced by the Soviet filmmakers rather than by the Japanese composer. Yamada knew that some scenes in the Soviet film would be accompanied by popular Japanese songs; in fact, it was his wife who helped Shneiderov purchase all the necessary records. Still, Yamada likely did not expect these songs to be used so emphatically.34

It is likely that Japanese critics were dissatisfied with the Soviet film’s music score not only because they expected more of Yamada Kōsaku, but also because it reminded them of kouta eiga (films with little songs), a film genre extremely popular in Japan in the 1920s. Kouta eiga were regular feature films, but they were accompanied by theme songs, which were performed during the screenings either live or on record. Frequently, the
songs’ lyrics were projected on the screen so the audience could sing along. The song *Tokyo Köshinkyoku* was originally composed for Mizoguchi Kenji’s feature film, *Tokyo March* (*Tokyo Köshinkyoku*, 1929), which was intended to be a “talkie.” However, due to technical difficulties, it had to be released as a silent film, accompanied by *kouta* (little song). By 1932 and 1933, when Shneiderov was shooting and editing his film, the genre of *kouta eiga* was already in decline and Japanese audiences did not want to see another depiction of Tokyo accompanied by a song they already knew too well. Viewers expected Soviet filmmakers to produce something much more powerful and innovative.

When Yamada approached the sound record for *Big Tokyo*, the movie he had in mind was Nikolai Ekk’s *The Road to Life* (*Putiovka v zhizn’, Jinsei annai*, 1931) – the first full-length Soviet sound film to be released in both Japan and the USSR. The film is set in a children’s labor commune, where former waifs are reclaimed as worthy Soviet citizens. It was released in Japan in May 1932 and quickly established itself as an exemplary work demonstrating the “ideal” use of sound in cinema. A leading expert on film sound theory in prewar Japan, Nakane Hiroshi, confessed that he had “never been so deeply moved by a sound film before,” and even included a detailed script of *The Road to Life* in his influential monograph *Tōkī ongaku ron* (Theorizing the Use of Music in Talkies). In his analysis of Ekk’s film, Nakane claims that the “contrapuntal” use of sound and image creates “amazing psychological effects,” especially in the last scene, in which Mustafa is murdered. His fellow commune members are waiting for him to drive the new steam locomotive, but instead, they witness the arrival of his dead body on the very same vehicle he was supposed to drive. Despite the scene’s emotional intensity, we hear no sorrowful music or mournful cries. Instead, we hear only the clatter of decelerating wheels and the slightly muted sound of a train whistle. According to Nakane, what makes this scene a “true culmination point” is its repudiation of lyrical music. He proclaims this sort of discreet, economical use of monotonous noises to be totally “unprecedented,” and sees it as the greatest achievement of Soviet sound cinema. Nakane’s view on Soviet talkies and sound cinema was, in general, shared by many other Japanese intellectuals, including Yamada Kōsaku. Just like Nakane, Yamada was an ardent fan of the contrapuntal use of sound, and considered
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*The Road to Life* the biggest breakthrough in Soviet sound cinema. In fact, it was Yamada who wrote the foreword to Nakane’s *Tōkī ongaku ron*. There is no doubt that Yamada was extremely excited about participating in the production of *Big Tokyo*, especially since its sound was going to be recorded at Mezhrabpomfilm, the same studio where Nikolai Ekk’s film was made.

When he traveled to Moscow, Yamada believed that, in the Soviet Union, he would be able to fully explore the methods employed in *The Road to Life*. Working on *Big Tokyo*, he tried eliminating music and adopting monotonous but expressive sounds (the ring of a bell, a factory siren). This was precisely the method that Nakane Hiroshi had valued so highly in Ekk’s film. A review of *Big Tokyo* published in *Phototaimusu* also seems to value the film’s use of noises. The review refers to a scene taken at the Meiji Seika confectionery factory where a rhythmic whistle accompanies an image of a young girl wrapping chocolate. This whistle, alongside the shouts of a tofu vendor and the sound of the factory siren, is lauded as a representation of a “good talkie” (*kono kuchibue koso tōkī de aru*). The reviewer also praises a scene depicting the Japanese *chindon’ya* (loudly dressed street musicians employed for advertising purposes) saying that the “old music” performed by this band is “well known to us” (*gojin ni najimibukai*) and therefore is “good for a talkie” (*tōkī ni ii*). The scene depicting the priestesses’ dance in a Shinto shrine, on the other hand, is criticized for being too long, and the sounds accompanying it are criticized for being unrealistic. The reviewer states that, while the foreign audience might not notice this, the drums and bells used in this sequence “sound clearly wrong” and therefore do not suit Japanese listeners (*nihonjin ni wa mukanu*).

Japanese critics wanted to hear noises and music that sounded “realistic” and thereby contributed to the creation of an authentic sound image of Japan. However, what sounded realistic to Japanese critics did not necessarily correspond to the musical tastes of the Soviet audience. Japanese viewers knew the cultural background behind the sound of a temple bell or the music played by the *chindon’ya*, and therefore could appreciate the realistic atmosphere these sounds created. Soviet viewers, on the contrary, were totally unfamiliar with Japanese musical culture and were therefore drawn to popular songs like *Tokyo Kōshinkyoku* and *Watashi no aozora* (there is no mention of *Big Tokyo*’s use of “noises” in the Soviet press). These songs had
some commonalities with Western music (*Watashi no aozora* is in fact a Japanese version of the American jazz song, *My Blue Heaven*), and they were therefore perceived by Soviet audiences as both familiar and different. Soviet audiences could enjoy these songs while also acknowledging their “exotic” difference because they could actually compare them to other popular Russian, American, and European songs.38

The lack of cultural awareness (especially regarding sound) made the co-production of *Big Tokyo* extremely difficult. The two countries knew so little about each other that producing a film that would be perceived as “realistic” in both the Soviet Union and Japan was practically impossible.39 If the Soviet side had accepted all of the artistic suggestions made by Yamada Kōsaku, the film would probably have been a sensation in Japan, but it would not have interested Soviet audiences unready to appreciate Yamada’s innovations. In order to draw the attention of Soviet audiences, *Big Tokyo* had to be accompanied with popular Japanese music. By doing so, however, the Soviet filmmakers radically decreased their chances of receiving positive publicity in Japan.

The Soviet side knew that the film would be screened not only in the USSR, but also in Japan and possibly some other foreign countries.39 Furthermore, the Soviet side was well informed about the expectations shared by the Japanese audiences. During his stay in Japan, Shneiderov had visited several film theaters and film studios and knew that foreign films released in Japan were predominantly talkies. Thus, it is safe to assume that the Japanese version of *Big Tokyo* was produced in a way that could not appeal to Japanese audiences not because the Soviet side was uninformed or clueless about Japanese tastes, but because it was not interested in making a film that would satisfy Japanese viewers.

The Soviet side’s lack of enthusiasm about the completion of *Big Tokyo* is reflected in a letter that Vladimir Shneiderov sent to VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Abroad) in the hope that this public organization established in order to foster cultural interactions between the Soviet Union and abroad would somehow influence his film studio: “I hereby ask VOKS to write a letter to Mezhrabpomfilm’s management and remind them about the necessity to keep their promises to *Asahi*. The newspaper’s correspondent in Moscow, Maruyama-san, has already been asking me about the work being...
done. I am extremely worried that without your assistance, the film studio will not hurry and the agreed deadline will be missed. This will be extremely embarrassing and will leave a bad impression in Japan.” In the same letter, written in February 1933, Shneiderov complains that, despite his promise to *Tokyo Asahi* to send five copies of his film within three months of his departure, the developed film footage had not even been printed a month later.

Why was Mezhrabpomfilm so indifferent towards the film’s release in Japan? The answer to this question is exceedingly political. Soviet cinema was never free from government intervention. In the 1920s, Soviet politics still enjoyed a certain pluralism, which enabled filmmakers to experiment with montage and establish a well-deserved worldwide reputation. However, this “golden age” came to an abrupt end during the “cultural revolution” of the early 1930s. The period of the First Five-Year Plan was a major turning point in the history of Soviet Russia and its cinema. The First All-Union Party Conference on Cinema organized in March 1928 was a decisive moment in eliminating independent initiatives and establishing the close Party control of cinema. By the time Shneiderov was editing *Big Tokyo*, the Soviet film industry had very little freedom, especially when portraying foreign countries or establishing business relations with abroad. The depiction of foreign lands and peoples had to be in compliance with the Soviet Union’s foreign politics. Thus, the situation surrounding Shneiderov’s documentary must be understood as a reflection of the Soviet Union’s official attitude concerning international politics in the Far East.

In March 1933, just a few weeks prior to Yamada Kōsaku’s arrival in Moscow, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations and officially declined the Soviet Union’s proposal to sign the nonaggression treaty. These important events explain both Mezhrabpomfilm’s indifference towards the project and the subsequent production of a film that clearly neglected information about Japanese “cinematic preferences.” At first, Mezhrabpomfilm’s officials did not know how to treat the project because the Soviet Union’s relations with Japan were still uncertain. Japan’s official refusal of the nonaggression treaty lent the situation some clarity, but it also deprived the project of its political importance. The necessity of consolidating cultural ties between the Soviet Union and Japan had lost its urgency. Thus, *Big Tokyo* became the first
Soviet film dedicated to Japan and also the first and the last prewar Soviet film that did not portray Japan and its people as enemies. In 1934, Alexander Dovzhenko’s feature film *Aerograd* was produced, in which the Japanese characters were depicted as malicious spies.\(^{43}\)

Despite the change in the diplomatic relations between the two countries, *Big Tokyo* was still released in both the Soviet Union and Japan. However, its artistic value was clearly damaged. The four-reel Japanese version of the film was edited hurriedly and premiered at the *Tokyo Asahi’s* head office in the middle of July 1933. As a review in *Phototaimusu* reports, this version was not even provided with Japanese subtitles. The Soviet version of the film was not released in Moscow until December (Figures 1.1 and 1.2), probably because Shneiderov was struggling with the task of imbuing his film with an appropriate political message. The solution he chose was to aid his documentary with an authoritative voiceover narrated by a Japanese “mask.” Shneiderov’s attempt to reinterpret the role of a Japanese *benshi*, however, did not meet with much approval. One Soviet critic even referred to the “mask” character as an “importunate companion (naviazchivyj sputnik).”\(^{44}\)

In co-producing a documentary film, both the Soviet Union and Japan were interested in learning about and perhaps even appropriating each other’s cinematic and sound techniques. However, it quickly became clear that there were obvious cultural and political differences that disabled any direct adoption of technological or stylistic methods developed by the other country. Just like Shneiderov’s attempt to recreate the atmosphere of Japanese *katsuben*, Yamada’s desire to explore the techniques he admired about *The Road to Life* were not ultimately successful. By combining traditional Japanese music and industrial noises, Yamada wished to create an image of a powerful, modernized country that still cherished its traditional culture. However, the Soviet audiences’ lack of cultural awareness surrounding Japanese sound and music, as well as the political intensity developing in the Far East, forced the Soviet filmmakers to follow a radically different agenda. Soviet audiences had to be provided with an exotic image of an underdeveloped country that tried to copy everything from the West. One of the reasons behind *Big Tokyo’s* excessive use of popular jazz songs lies in the filmmakers’ desire to emphasize the degree of Japan’s “Americanization.”

Besides Yamada and Shneiderov, there were also other powerful parties
pursuing their own personal interests. Mezhrabpomfilm wanted to use *Big Tokyo* as an exotic enticement for the Western film market, but at the same time it did not want to produce an ideologically inappropriate film that would be criticized by the Communist Party. *Tokyo Asahi* perceived the joint film production as an opportunity to draw readers’ attention, to proclaim itself as an internationally renowned newspaper, and to improve the image of Japan, which had been seriously damaged by its military involvement in China. In order to spread “objective” information to the Western public, *Tokyo Asahi* collaborated with non-Japanese agents such as G. Craiger, who edited *Japan: A Pictorial Interpretation*, or the Soviet filmmakers involved with *Big Tokyo*. The collaboration with the latter, however, proved to the great disappoint of many Japanese intellectuals that the Soviet Union’s alleged glorification and “realistic” depiction of a rising Asia applied only to the Soviet republics (Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in *Turksib*) and its foreign satellites (Mongolia in *Storm Over Asia*). The Japanese project of modernization, on the other hand, was looked upon with jealousy and suspicion. During the “cultural revolution” of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet Union’s social policy underwent a series of drastic changes that included the abandonment of internationalism and the revival of a nation-based patriotism. Instead of advocating for the world revolution, the Soviet Union shifted its focus to strengthening itself internally. Shneiderov’s *Big Tokyo* reflected this shift and revealed the Soviet Union’s discontent with Japan’s fast-growing economic sector and its advances in China. It did so by taking control of the film’s soundtrack, recognizing sound as a powerful tool for conveying political ideology. It is through sound that *Big Tokyo* delivers its ideological message, and it was during the process of sound recording that the interests of the Japanese and Soviet “partners” conflicted the most. The ideological battle over the film’s sound, however, left no winners. Their inability to compromise resulted in the creation of two imperfect film versions, both of which were quickly forgotten in the history of cinema.

Notes
1. Akiyama Kuniharu, *Nihon no eiga ongakushi* [The History of Japanese Music] (Tokyo: Tabata shoten, 1974), 80.
2. *Kokusai Eiga Shinbun* 115 (December 5, 1933): 25.
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3. Vladimir Shneiderov (1900-1973) was a Soviet filmmaker, television presenter, and writer. He began as a documentary filmmaker specializing in travelogues, but as his career evolved, he also started producing feature films such as Dzhulbars (Dzhul’bars, 1936) and Gorge of the Alamos (Ushchel’e Alamasov, 1937). From 1960, he became the host of his own TV show called “The Travelers’ Club” (Klub puteshestvovnikov). Shneiderov’s documentaries include The Great Flight (Velikii pereliot, 1925), Pamir: At the Foothills of Death (Pamir: Podnozhiie smerti, 1928), At the Height of 4500 Meters (Na vysote 4500, 1931), Two Oceans (Dva okeana, 1933), and many others.

4. When looking at the picture, some Japanese readers might have experienced a feeling of déjà vu. In 1923, immediately following the Great Earthquake, the Soviet steamship “Lenin” arrived in Yokohama to deliver medical supplies and provisions. The steamship, however, also held Japanese communists residing in the Soviet Union and illegal propaganda materials. In the mornings and evenings, the whole crew would line up on the deck and perform revolutionary songs, including the “Internationale,” and try to agitate Japanese sailors from nearby ships. Such behavior naturally became an immediate political issue, and the steamship had to return to Vladivostok. It is possible that the USSR intended the musical performance on Sibiriakov in 1932 to be an alternative to the revolutionary image delivered in 1923. It remains a fact, however, that this form of intercultural encounter contributed to the formation of the “musical” image of the USSR.

5. GARF, f. 5283, op. 4a, d. 213, 1-10.

6. As early as 1927, VOKS’ (All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Abroad) representative in Japan, Evgenii Spal’vin, referred to Tokyo Asahi as a “Soviet-friendly” newspaper (GARF, f. 5283, op. 4, d. 36). We must also remember that “until the late 1930s, it was the newspaper companies that drove the development of the nonfiction film, not major film studios.” Abé Mark Nornes, Japanese Documentary Film: The Meiji Era Through Hiroshima (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 64.

7. An advertisement of Japan: A Pictorial Interpretation in Asahi Graph (10 July, 1932): 2.

8. “Roshia no meikantoku wo mukae wagakoku bunka no eigaka, Shochiku kinema ni manekaruru Pudofukin shi” [A Prominent Russian Director is Going to Film Our Culture: Pudovkin is Invited by Shochiku Kinema], Osaka Mainichi, 7, August 23, 1931.

9. According to Fukuro Ippei, who acted as a mediator between Shochiku and VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Abroad), Pudovkin’s visit was canceled primarily because Shochiku’s young studio head, Kido Shirō, was “afraid to establish close ties with the USSR.” GARF, f. 5283, op. 4, d. 68, 3.

10. Soviet travelogues released in prewar Japan include: V. Shneiderov’s Pamir (Pamir, Pamīru, 1928), N. Vishniak’s The Northern Course (Kurs Nord, Kyokuhoku ni susumu Sovēto, 1930), V. Turin’s Turksib (Turksib, Turukushibu, 1929), N. Klado’s Black Sand (Oazis v peskakh, Kuroi suna, 1931-1934), Y. Posel’ski’s Cheliuskin (Geroi Arktiki: Cheliuskin, Cheryūsukin gō no saigo, 1934), and V. Shneiderov’s Big Tokyo (Bo Isshōi Tokio, Dai Tōkyō, 1933).

11. Alexandr Deriabin, “‘Nasha psikhologiiia i ikh psikhologiiia – soversheno raznye veshchi.’
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‘Afganistan’ Vladimir Erofeeva i sovetskii kul’turfilm dvadtsatykh godov’ [“Our Psychology and Their Psychology Are Completely Different.” Vladimir Erofeev’s Afghanistan and the Soviet Culture Film in the Twenties], Kinovedcheskie zapiski 54 (2001): 53.

12. “Pis’mo iz Berlina: Afganistan v Berline” [Letter from Berlin: Afghanistan in Berlin], Kino 25 (June 1929): 3.

13. Mats Karlsson, “Kurahara Korehito’s Road to Proletarian Realism,” Japan Review 20 (2008): 239.

14. Hirabayashi Taiko, “Turukushibu: kanrango no shirōtokan” [Turksib: An impression of an amateur], Eiga Ōrai 69 (November 1930): 36.

15. Shimizu Chiyota, “Turukushibu” [Turksib], Kinema Jumpō 381 (November 1930): 36.

16. The consultant was a young journalist, Yamamoto Shinichirō, who later became the director of Daiei studio’s Tokyo branch. The interpreter was Fukuro Ippei, a known specialist in Soviet cinema.

17. RGALI, f. 3050, op. 1, d. 139, 64.

18. Yamada Kōsaku, “Daitōkyō no rokuon” [Recording Sound for the Big Tokyo] in Gotō Nobuko, Dan Ikuma, Tōyama Kazuyuki eds., Yamada Kōsaku chosaku zenshū 3 [The Complete Works of Yamada Kōsaku 3] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2001), 312-313.

19. Yamamoto Sae, Senjika no bampaku to “Nihon” no hyōshō [World’s Fair During the War and the Representation of “Japan”] (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2012), 123.

20. Ikegami Kaken, “Eiga haiken (Dai Tōkyō)” [Watching Films (Big Tokyo)], Phototaimusu (September 1933): 94.

21. Even before 1931 there were multiple attempts to create full-length sound feature films, but the first truly successful projects were Nikolai Ekk’s Road to Life (Putiovka v zhizn’) released in Soviet theaters on June 1, 1931, and Gosho Heinosuke’s The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine (Madamu to nyōbō) released in Japanese theaters on August 1, 1931.

22. Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Grigori Alexandrov, “Statement on Sound” in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 234-235.

23. Recent research has shown that even with the arrival of sound, benshi continued to play an important role in Japanese cinema as interpreters, voice artists, and narrators. For more about the participation of benshi in the production and distribution of “talkies,” see: Kitada Rie, “Tōkō jidai no benshi: gaikoku eiga no nhongo jimaku aruiwa ‘nihonban’ seisei wo meguru kōsatsu” [Benshi during the sound era: a study of Japanese subtitles in foreign films and the production of “nihonban”], Eiga Kenkyū 4 (2009): 4-21. Hata Ayumi, “Koe no dōin: 1930-40 mendai kiroku eiga ni okeru rajio anaunsō to benshi” [Mobilizing Voice: Radio Broadcasters and Benshi in 1930s-40s Documentary Cinema], Eizōgaku 76 (2006): 5-24.

24. A Japanese film studio, PCL (Photo Chemical Laboratory), had contacted VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Abroad) through Shneiderov, expressing a desire to exchange knowledge on sound recording with NIKFI (The USSR Cinema and Photo
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Research Institute) and other Soviet film studios. GARF, f. 5283, op. 4, d. 314, 10 (ob.).

25. Nihon Kōkyōgaku Kyōkai, established by Yamada in 1925, later developed into the NHK Symphony Orchestra.

26. In 1930, VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Abroad) celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Yamada Kōsaku’s music career. GARF, f. 5283, op. 4, d. 67. It is also telling that during his concert tour in the Soviet Union in 1931, Yamada paid a special visit to a sound recording film studio in Moscow. GARF, f. 5283, o. 8, d. 97.

27. Ikegami Kaken, “Eiga haiken (Dai Tōkyō)” [Watching Films (Big Tokyo)], Phototaimusu (September 1933): 94.

28. The sounds of a temple bell and a factory siren have not been eliminated from the film completely. However, they do not accompany the film’s opening scene. Contrary to Yamada’s intentions, we do not hear these noises until the middle of the movie.

29. On the tradition of katsuben in Japanese cinema see: Jeffery A. Dym, Benshi, Japanese Silent Film Narrators, and Their Forgotten Narrative Art of Setsumei: A History of Japanese Silent Film Narration (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003). Aaron Gerow, Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation, and Spectatorship, 1895-1925 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

30. Valeri Pozner mentions that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when showing films to rural audiences, Soviet mobile projection teams were urged by the Communist Party to explain the films’ subject matter and its ideological connotations before or during the films’ screenings. Interestingly, the majority of instructions distributed to these projection teams mentioned the experience of Japanese benshi as a possible model for imitation. Valeri Pozner, “Ot fil’ma k seansu: k voprosu ob ustnosti v sovetskom kino 1920-30-kh godov” [From Film to Performance: Addressing the Problem of Orality in Soviet Cinema in the 1920s and 30s] in Hans Günther and Sabina Hansgen eds., Sovetskaia vlast’ i mediia [Soviet Authorities and the Media] (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), 337. Urban Soviet audiences also knew about the Japanese tradition of katsuben from Soviet film journals and film exhibitions organized by VOKS.

31. In 1930, when the Japanese film industry was still looking for optimal ways of presenting foreign “talkies,” there were at least three American films released with introductory scenes very reminiscent of the early maesetsu. Happy Days, Paramount on Parade, and King of Jazz were all supplied with scenes that showed Japanese benshi and actors giving introductory remarks in their native tongue. Kitada Rie, “Tōkō jidai no benshi: gaikoku eiga no nihongo jimaku aruiwa ‘nihonban’ seisei wo meguru kōsatsu” [Benshi during the sound era: a study of Japanese subtitles in foreign films and the production of ‘nihonban’], Eiga Kenkyū 4 (2009): 11. This possibility is rather remote, but it could be that Shneiderov had actually watched one of these films.

32. RGALI, f. 631, op. 2, d. 13.

33. Kanō Akira, “Dai Tōkyo” [Big Tokyo], Eiga Hyōron 15, no. 2 (August 1933): 120.

34. Ironically, Big Tokyo was not the only time the song Tokyo Köshinkyoku stole the spotlight from Yamada. In 1937, the Japanese composer would yet again be involved in an
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international film project. This time, he composed the music score for Arnold Fanck and Itami Mansaku’s *The New Earth (Die Tochter des Samurai, Atarashiki tsuchi)* co-produced by Japan and Germany. It is worth quoting Yamada Kōsaku’s words after he discovered that one of the scenes in *The New Earth* was accompanied by *Tokyo Kōshinkyoku* – a song he did not intend to use – without his consent: “I had neither the courage to get mad, nor the power to cry. The utter idiocy of the whole situation just stupefied me.” Daibō Masaki, “Todokanai merodi: Nichidoku gassaku eiga *Atarashiki Tsuchi* no eiga ongaku ni miru Yamada Kōsaku no risō to genjitsu” [A Melody That Doesn’t Reach: Yamada Kōsaku’s Ideal and Reality in The Music Score of the German-Japanese Co-production Film *The New Earth*] in Sugino Kentarō ed., *Eiga to neishyon* [Cinema and Nation] (Tokyo: Minerva Shobō, 2011), 17. Presumably, the same spectrum of emotions overwhelmed Yamada when he watched Shneiderov’s film. The fact that Yamada never spoke about *Big Tokyo* after its official release reflects his negative attitude towards the outcome of this project.

35. Hosokawa Shūhei, “Kouta eiga no bunka shi” [The Cultural History of Kouta Eiga], *Cinema Don Don* 1 (2012): 12-15.
36. Nakane Hiroshi, *Tōkō ongaku ron* [Theorizing the Use of Music in Talkies] (Tokyo: Ōraisha, 1932), 266.
37. Daibō Masaki, “Todokanai merodi: Nichidoku gassaku eiga *Atarashiki Tsuchi* no eiga ongaku ni miru Yamada Kōsaku no risō to genjitsu” [A Melody That Doesn’t Reach: Yamada Kōsaku’s Ideal and Reality in The Music Score of the German-Japanese Co-production Film *The New Earth*] in Sugino Kentarō ed., *Eiga to neishyon* [Cinema and Nation] (Tokyo: Minerva Shobō, 2011), 12-14.
38. On the popularity of jazz music in the Soviet Union, see: S. Frederick Starr, *Red & Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994).
39. The lack of cultural understanding was especially tangible on the Soviet side. Japanese society, on the other hand, was largely familiar with the Russian musical tradition. From the nineteenth century onwards, Japanese intellectuals were drawn to Russia’s experience of absorbing the European tradition of classical music and synthesizing it with the musical heritage of various ethnic groups coexisting within its geographical borders. See for example: Yamada Kōsaku, “Sovuēto minyō nitsuite” [About Soviet Folk Songs] in Gotō Nobuko, Dan Ikuma, Tōyama Kazuyuki eds., *Yamada Kōsaku chosaku zenshū 1* [The Complete Works of Yamada Kōsaku 1] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2001), 292-295. After the Bolshevik Revolution, hundreds of Russian citizens emigrated to China and Japan, where many of them earned money by teaching music and ballet. An image of a Russian musician was extremely widespread in prewar and wartime Japan and was even popularized by Japanese cinema. In 1942-1943 Shimazu Yasuijirō directed *My Nightingale* (*Watashi no uguiusu*, 1943) – a feature film depicting the life of a Japanese orphan girl, Mariko (played by Yamaguchi Yoshiko a.k.a. Li Xianglan), living in a Russian immigrant community in Manchuria. The film’s storyline revolves around Mariko’s singing career and romance, aided by musical performances by the Russian orchestra. The film cast consists mostly of Russian émigrés, and the language they speak is also mostly Russian accompanied by
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Japanese subtitles. For more about My Nightingale and its use of Russian music, see: Irina Melnikova, “Chei solovei? Otzvuk pesen russkogo Kharbina v iaponskom kino” [Whose Nightingale? The Echo of the Songs of Russian Harbin in Japanese Cinema], Kinovedcheskie zapiski 94-95 (2012): 190-207.

During his stay in Moscow, Yamada Kōsaku received the impression that Big Tokyo would be exported to Germany and the United States. Yamada Kōsaku, “Daitōkyo no rokuon” [Recording the Sound of Big Tokyo] in Gotō Nobuko, Dan Ikuma, Tōyama Kazuyuki eds., Yamada Kōsaku chosaku zenshū 3 [The Complete Works of Yamada Kōsaku 3] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2001), 317.

40. GARF, f. 5283, op. 4, d. 314, 9.
41. Peter Kenez, Cinema & Soviet Society, 1917-1953 (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1992), 101-126.
42. For more about the depiction of Japanese as an “enemy,” see: Irina Melnikova, “Iaponskaia tema v sovetskikh ‘oboronnykh’ fil’makh 30-kh godov” [Japanese Theme in the Soviet “Defense Films” in the 30s], Japanese Slavic and Eastern European Studies 23 (2002): 57-82. For more about the representation of foreigners and foreignness in Soviet and Russian cinema see: Stephen M. Norris and Zara M. Torlone eds., Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).
43. Koval’ V., “Bol’shoi Tokio” [Big Tokyo], Kinogazeta (Moscow) 59-60 (December 19, 1933): 5.