Animating Film Theory
Redrobe, Karen

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IV :: Animation and the World
As initially developed in the 1930s, Imamura Taihei’s theory of animation took American cartoons as a point of departure, especially Disney cartoons such as *Mickey Mouse* and *Silly Symphonies*, but also those of Disney’s rival, Fleischer Studios, such as *Popeye the Sailor* and *Color Classics*. This is not particularly surprising: other theorists of film and mass culture such as Sergei Eisenstein, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno repeatedly turned to Disney cartoons in articulating their reflections.¹ Yet Imamura’s film theory is unusual in its equal emphasis on animation and documentary. While his publications tend to treat them separately, animation and documentary were for him two faces of cinema, interrelated and inseparable. Moreover, he did not relegate animation in advance to the realm of fantasy in contrast to the reality of live-action cinema, nor conversely did he see documentary in terms of objectivity in contrast to the subjectivity of fiction. His film theory was ultimately able to work across animation and documentary because it centered on an unusual conceptualization of photography, which led to his distinctive approach to cartoons as a form of realism.

Imamura’s reflections used American cartoons not only as a point of departure for theorizing the realism of animation but also as a practical model for improving the quality of Japanese cartoons. Imamura’s 1938 essay, “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films” ("Nihon manga eiga no tame ni"), opens with such concerns: “I recently went into a theater for short films, and there was but one cartoon. Surprisingly, it was a Japanese cartoon, *Kaeru no kenpō* [Frog swordplay]. Accustomed to seeing cartoons like *Mickey Mouse* and *Popeye the Sailor*, I found Japanese cartoons impoverished.”²

Another aspiration of Imamura’s cartoon theory, then, was to reform cartoon production in Japan. In this respect, Imamura’s theory shows
continuity with concerns of prior film criticism for reforming national production, particularly as articulated in the pure film movement that gathered steam from the late 1910s through the 1920s in Japan. Yet Imamura's interest in reforming Japanese cartoons took a turn that seems, at least at first, to be at odds with his interest in realism. For his reflections turned toward how cinema might enable a practical re-purposing of traditional Japanese art forms, which he himself does not deem realist. As a consequence, Imamura's work consistently flirts with forms of cultural nationalism or, more precisely, national culturalism in the form of traditionalism. In addition, insofar as Imamura turns to Japanese traditions in an attempt to take Japanese cartoons beyond received oppositions between Japanese tradition and Western modernity, his film theory verges on the modernist conceit commonly referred to as "overcoming modernity." 

In sum, Imamura's film theory operated between two modernist tendencies—traditionalism and realism. I propose to look at how Imamura resolved this tension through a conceptualization of photography that allowed him to produce an original variation on apparatus theory. Instead of the familiar emphasis on the monocular lens of the camera and regimes of one-point perspective, Imamura stressed the descriptive, explanatory, and even narrative force of the camera and photography, both in cartoons and documentaries. This emphasis allowed him to mobilize techniques of traditional Japanese arts as potential modes of realism that, because they were no longer standing in opposition to modern cinema, could actively reform or even move beyond it. 

I also propose to explore the sociohistorical implications of Imamura's invention of a "transcriptive apparatus" to resolve the tension between traditional arts and realist cinema. As Irie Yoshirō notes, "Imamura's investigations into the essence of cinema began alongside his emerging consciousness of Marxism." When Imamura leapt into film theory in earnest in 1934, contributing to the reader's column of Kinema Junpō and founding and contributing to the film magazine Eiga Shūdan, a series of mass arrests of communists and others deemed politically suspect (among them Marxists) was leading to the collapse of the Japanese Communist Party and to conversions (tenkō) of intellectuals and artists from Marxism to nationalism, among them Imamura. It is thus difficult to gauge the impact of Marxism on Imamura: for instance, where Irie calls attention to the Marxist currents of Imamura's film theory, Ōtsuka Eiji stresses Imamura's renunciation of Marxism. It is consequently possible to see a tension between Marxism and na-
tionalism within Imamura’s theory, which is analogous to the tension between realism and traditionalism. Indeed, Imamura’s goal of producing distinctively Japanese cartoons and documentaries might be seen as analogous to the formation of cultural nationalism out of cosmopolitanism and Marxism.

I will focus largely on his “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films,” for a number of reasons. First, although Imamura is best known for his 1940 book on documentary film, *A Theory of Documentary Film* (*Kiroku eiga ron*), and for the first book-length treatise on animation, *A Theory of Cartoon Film* (*Manga eiga ron*), which was first published in 1941, revised and published again in 1948 and 1965, and recently republished in 2005, “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films” not only anticipates the arguments of the 1941 book but also presents them in a condensed form, making clear the connections between arguments that are sometimes held apart in the book.” Second, the 1938 essay addresses a specific moment in the history of animation: the introduction of new techniques for producing a sense of depth in animation, that is, the multiplanar camera system, which received a great deal of popular and critical attention in the context of Disney’s *The Old Mill* (1937) and Fleischer’s *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba’s Forty Thieves* (1937). Imamura continued to evoke new Disney and American cartoons throughout his career, but there is a sense of historical urgency at this early stage in his career. Arguably, it was the critical buzz surrounding the technical achievements of American cartoons that spurred Imamura to focus attention on the apparatus and realism in animation. Third, this buzz about technical innovations in animation around 1937, in combination with the economic ascendancy of American cartoons throughout the world, imparts a sense of urgency to Imamura’s reflections on the relation between the technical and the economic, and to his concerns about how to produce cartoons in Japan.

**Photography**

Imamura opens “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films” with praise for the vitality of movement in Disney cartoons, in contrast to which Japanese cartoons prove deficient, as the example of *Kaeru no kenpō* makes woefully clear to him.8 As his discussion shifts to the practical matter of how to produce such vitality in cartoons, he takes a rather surprising tack. Imamura associates the vitality of animation with realism of movement, and at the same time he stresses the importance of photography over drawing or painting techniques.9 He thus writes, adding
emphasis to underscore his points: “The realism [shajitsusei] of Disney’s cartoons — this wellspring of vital force — where does it come from? It comes from that fact that the drawings [e] are not just drawings; they are drawings combined with photography [shashin to ketsugō shita e]. In fact, in the cartoon, photographic methods prevail over drawings [shishin teki na hōhō ga kaiga o shihai shite iru no de aru].” This may seem an obvious point: the distinctiveness of cartoons lies in movement, and movement takes precedence over techniques of drawing and painting, at once conjoining and governing the images. Yet discussions of the vitality of animation usually privilege the art of the hand over the “technical work” of photography. In Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished manuscript and notes, written in the late 1930s and early 1940s, on Disney cartoons, for instance, he calls attention to what he calls plasmaticness, that is, the plasticity and elasticity of line and figure in animation.

Eisenstein deftly steers his discussion toward the stroke drawing, a drawing in which the line traces a continuous contour in a single stroke, in form rather like an amoeba. Eisenstein highlights how this basic feature of cartoons — the stroke drawing — allows for a continual transformation and deformation of form, without an actual loss of form. At one point he refers to its “poly-formic capabilities.” Eisenstein thus calls attention to the elasticity of shapes, the mobility of contours, and the fluidity and diversity of forms, which he frequently links to primordial protoplasm-like vitality, to primitive exuberance and ecstasy, and to animism: “The very idea, if you will, of the animated cartoon is like a direct embodiment of the method of animism.”

In contrast, while Imamura is similarly interested in the vitality and movement of animation, his account goes to great lengths to de-emphasize the primacy of drawing: “Taken one by one the still drawings are not particularly attractive. A still image of something like Mickey Mouse tends rather to be ugly. How is it that an image crudely drawn in heavy lines without any particular charm, when set in motion, becomes full of life and spirit, and simply put, is no longer a drawing? The secret must lie in movement itself, that which moves the drawings.” But also in contrast to Eisenstein’s emphasis on animism, animation for Imamura is above all a matter of the realism of movement, and that realism derives from photography and photographic methods — over and above techniques of drawing or painting. But what are these photographic methods?

Imamura calls attention to how photography allows for “parsing action” or “parsing movement.” His turn of phrase is dōsa no bunkai, which might be translated in a number of different ways, among them
“decomposing motion” or “breaking down movement,” for Imamura’s usage implies the decomposition and recomposition of the movement of distinct entities—in effect, his emphasis falls on character animation or object animation. Take, for instance, his example of the animation of the drunken mouse in Disney’s *The Country Cousin* (1936), which, he claims, “is nothing other than photography of a person in an inebriated state,” calling attention to how “each frame of film is rendered in drawings” (see figure 13.1). In other words, although he does not directly refer us to rotoscoping, which was common practice in 1930s American cartoons, Imamura’s emphasis on how the animation of the drunken mouse is rendered by drawing the photographed movement of a person frame by frame suggests that he has something like rotoscoping in mind. His subsequent example from Fleischer’s *Popeye the Sailor Meets Sinbad the Sailor* (1936) similarly calls attention to the photographic parsing of movement, focusing on the scene in which the roc takes flight in the first reel. As Imamura notes, the roc’s extended takeoff resembles that of a Douglas passenger plane (probably the Douglas DC-2, introduced in 1934, or the DC-3, introduced 1936). Indeed, the giant cartoon bird skips and bumps along its runaway, gaining elevation only to fall back to the ground, with the sound of engines buzzing over the music (see figures...
13.2–13.4). But then Imamura adds, “The thoroughly realistic movement of its wings is clearly a pictorial rendering based on parsing the flight of a bird with photographic filming [shashin satsuei].”

As such examples attest, Imamura’s use of the term shashin, conventionally translated as “photography,” is complex. His use of shashin implies two distinctive orientations. On the one hand, what he calls photography seems to be the same thing as filming, or at least seems practically indistinguishable from it. The term shashin appears in different combinations and contexts in which photography merges with filming, that is, producing film footage. Thus, we find Imamura restating his basic thesis about animation: “If the parsing of action did not proceed instant by instant through photography, the vitality of the mouse, duck, and dog [Mickey, Donald, and Goofy] could not be expressed. The parsing of a continuous chain of vital movement by means of moving photographs [katsudō shashin] begins with drawings to bring about movement-time.”

I will discuss Imamura’s conceptualization of temporality, but I wish first to make two points about this first orientation of shashin in Imamura. First, his use of shashin moves easily between kinds of mediatic capture that are frequently held apart today. We often think of photography in terms of instantaneity, stills, and stopped time (snapping photos) in contrast to the continuity, movement, and temporal flow of filming sequences. Yet we do not resolve anything by concluding that shashin in Imamura really refers to filming and not to photography. Similarly, it won’t fix matters to assume that he is really thinking of the movie camera rather than the still camera. We should not presume that we know what photography really is or what cinema really is. Rather, we should accept the challenge of the uncertainty of received distinctions afforded in Imamura’s use of shashin. Let me begin by considering what is common to cinema and photography that might explain Imamura’s conceptualization, if only by way of contrast.

In Japanese, both photographs and films are sometimes included under the rubric eizō, a term that is commonly translated as “image,” but that refers more specifically to mechanically produced and reproduced images. Imamura occasionally uses this term near the end of “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films.” Although Imamura is interested in the scientific and technical aspects of cinema, he tends to separate its photographic methods from the domain of (capitalist) mass production and reproduction. His primary concern then is not the reproducibility of images that is often associated with the term eizō.
FIGURES 13.2, 13.3, AND 13.4 Stills from Popeye the Sailor Meets Sinbad the Sailor (1936).
In English usage, the term *shooting* refers both to taking photos and filming. This usage directs attention to the importance of capture, with emphasis on targeting and contacting, which is also very different in tone from Imamura’s notion of “parsing action.” Parsing movement with photographic methods for him is *not a matter of referentiality* in the sense of a one-point, one-moment contact between object and image, spatially or temporally. Nor is there a sense of the object captured, mum-mified, or frozen. On the contrary, Imamura associates the photographic parsing of movement with the expression of vitality. As such, his understanding of shashin stands in contrast to currents in film theory related to Bazinian realism as Phillip Rosen describes them: “Photographic and filmic images have normally been apprehended as indexical traces, for their spatial field and the objects depicted were in the camera’s ‘presence’ at some point prior to the actual reading of the sign. The indexical trace is a matter of pastness.”

There is something similar to the indexical trace at work in Imamura’s examples of the animation of the drunken mouse and the flight of the roc, and yet, rather than a matter of pastness, it is a matter of vitality. This makes sense if we consider the procedures of rotoscoping, already in use from the mid-1910s, in which animation was drawn frame by frame from film footage. Donald Crafton describes it as “a new process Max Fleischer called rotoscoping. Motion pictures of various mechanisms were made; then, by projecting the developed footage on frame at a time and tracing it on cels, a film of schematic clarity could be made.”

In rotoscoping, the “presence” of the camera is thus doubled. The camera is first present to film the live-action footage and then again to film the drawn images based on the live-action footage. In some currents of cinematic realism, the presence of the camera is often taken as a guarantee of one-point referentiality and thus of a linear relation capable of assuring that a photo, for instance, can be a document and therefore ground a historical relation. Consequently, the realism of animation, evident in rotoscoping, must grapple with multiple presences and cannot make claims for linearity. In this respect, it is telling that Imamura’s example of the flight of the roc has two indexes: the Douglas airplane and the flight of a bird. And if, as Imamura suggests, both of them drew on photographic sources, then both entailed two camera “presences” during production. If we think of realism in terms of referentiality, there are already four points of camera presence.

As such, animation presents a profound challenge to theories of cinematic realism, which have tended to treat indexicality as a form of one-
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point referentiality based on a moment of indexical contact or capture, which is in turn grounded in the sense of photographic instantaneity. Animation automatically doubles and redoubles the index. This is surely one of the reasons why animation has so often been associated with the digital (the multiplication of sources within a single image or the multiplication of images from a single source) in contrast with the analog (one-point or one-moment presence). While the contrast between the digital and analog has often tended to exaggeration and thus to an unworkable opposition, it does concisely point to the challenge of Imamura’s theory of animation: its realism is based neither on reproducibility nor on one-point referentiality. What is more, animation does not stand in opposition to documentary, because realism for Imamura is not a matter of guaranteeing the one-point, one-instant presence of the camera.

Nonetheless, Imamura stresses the temporality of photographic methods. It is photography that transforms the spatiality of painting or drawing into the temporality of cartoons. He writes,

What becomes evident here is that, conceptually, the cartoon [manga] is something fundamentally different from painting [kaiga]. Of course, individual images are paintings. Yet these paintings in cartoons, taken one by one, do not possess any particular artistic meaning. Painting is essentially a spatial art. However, while the paintings in the cartoon film may be spatial, they first take on artistic consistency on the strict condition of being temporal paintings. Accordingly, insofar as the arts of drawing and painting in cartoons are grounded in photographic methods and combined with photography [shashin to ketsugōshi], cartoons come into being as a temporal art, wherein lies their specificity.

Once again, Imamura uses the verb ketsugō suru (to combine, join, or unite) in a manner that invites us to read the effect of photography in two ways. On the one hand, photography refers to the process of combining drawn images into a sequence that will move when projected. When Imamura insists that cartoons must be based in photographic methods and combined with photography, his account appears consonant with rotoscoping, and with using film photography to decompose motion and then to recompose that motion with drawings. On the other hand, there is some ambiguity in his description of drawings being combined or united with photography, for we have the impression that not only does photography connect one image with another but also the images themselves are becoming somewhat photographic, being combined or suffused with photography itself. Here we reach the limits of
translating the term shashin as “photography” and arrive at the second orientation of photography in Imamura’s film theory.

As has often been noted, photography in Japan did not give rise to a new term or neologism, as it did in Europe. Rather a term already in usage, shashin, was applied to photography. Photography was thus placed in a specific lineage of artistic practices and discursive frameworks. As Maki Fukuoka writes,

In writing on the history of photography in Japan, scholars commonly note that the Japanese word shashin conveys different meanings than the English word photography. While the term shashin existed prior to the introduction of photography in Japan, only in the 1870s did it become a stable reference to the technology. Indeed, in the discourse on Japan’s photographic history, shashin is a cumbersome term that does not yield valuable discussion. And yet shashin casts an unmistakable and enduring symbolic shadow on the field and is a distinct part of its history.22

Fukuoka goes on to explain that, if the cumbersome term shashin has not yielded valuable discussion, it is because commentators have remained content to indicate that, before the advent of photography, shashin signified something akin to “realism,” and their investigations have stalled there, with a vague notion of realism. In contrast, to historicize the putative realism of shashin, Fukuoka explores the discourses and practices associated with shashin prior to the introduction of photography, showing how “the concept of shin and shashin that came to be associated with copper-etching prints, sketches, and ink rubbing underwent multilayered processes of intellectual challenge, confirmation, and authentication. As tensions in textual and pictorial representational systems were resolved, the concepts of shin and shashin congealed and symbolized ideas of fidelity between depicted subject and print.”23 It was within this epistemological and historical context that shashin came to serve as a stable reference to photographic technology in the 1870s, as in the writings of the translator Yanagawa Shunsan. Fukuoka thus concludes, “Yanagawa’s characterization [of photography as shashin] stemmed from his concern for the process and his attention to the space between image and object, the level of fidelity maintained within this space, rather than the impression gathered from the photographs in and of themselves.”24

While Imamura’s concerns differ from Yanagawa’s, Imamura’s insistence on the realism of photography in the 1930s does inherit something of this sense of shashin that began to hold sway from the 1870s:
shashin as a process of maintaining fidelity between image and object rather than an impression imparted by the photographs themselves. In this respect, even though Imamura insists on a contrast between kaiga (drawing or painting) and manga (cartooning) on the basis of shashin, his use of photography or photographic methods is not antithetical to painting. Photography might even be characterized as another kind of drawing or painting, as indicated in Imamura’s characterization of cartoons as “temporal painting” (jikan teki na kaiga). Moreover, Imamura subsequently situates photography in a lineage of materialist depiction that he associates with oil painting.

In sum, there are two orientations implicit in Imamura’s use of shashin. Shashin feels closer to filming or cinematography than to photography insofar as it implies a cinematic decomposition and recomposition of movement or action. But shashin implies a practical sense of photography as a process of sustaining and guaranteeing fidelity between image and object. Such fidelity is a matter of indexicality, but this indexicality is not that of a one-point or one-moment contact with an object. Rather, in a manner reminiscent of the prephotographic association of shashin with etching, sketching, and ink rubbing, shashin in Imamura’s work implies a sort of multipoint durational capture that is supposed to capture the temporal depth of movement rather than merely combining discrete instants.

Thinking with the Camera

In his 1940 essay, “A Theory of Documentary Cinema,” included in his book on documentary film published the same year, Kiroku eiga ron (A theory of documentary film), Imamura builds to the provocative statement “the camera is human” to sum up his stance on cinematic documentation. He opens his account by stressing: “To document something is not the same as having it mechanically recorded and unilaterally reflected in human consciousness.” This insight encourages Imamura to emphasize that documentation is a form of subjective expression, not objective recording. His theory initially appears intent on downplaying or even dismissing the role of the camera. As a consequence, at least initially, his account appears entirely at odds with apparatus theory. He writes, “The real significance of [the short documentary film] Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon was not the birth of a new machine. Rather, it was the birth of something new that we do not fully understand—a more social form of human understanding or way
of knowing. To document via film means to express only through film, to think things through only via film.” Imamura finds something akin to a new machinic consciousness deriving from the entanglement of human consciousness with the new machine, the camera.

In his characterization of this new machinic consciousness as more social and collective, we perhaps see echoes of a Marxist sensibility. In his account of documentary, as in his discussion of cartoons, Imamura associates the studio with the factory as a new form of collective endeavor. Yet the Marxist concern that revolutionary transformations in modes of production have not lead to revolutionary transformation in social relations (due to the persistence of older forms of social relations that empower, for instance, the foreman at the expense of workers) does not register in Imamura’s account. The idea that Japan in particular was not modernizing or “revolutionizing” due to the persistence of “feudal” social relations was a major concern in Marxist thought at the time. Imamura, however, does not address the persistence of uneven social relations or the exploitation of workers in factories. It is instead the social energies implied in the factory, as new collective social endeavor, that capture Imamura’s imagination. In “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films” he submits that the age of solitary artist is vanishing and suggests: “Wouldn’t painting of greater social import [mottomo shakai teki na kaiga] be based on the industrial system and be built on the cooperative work of hundreds of artists, like the manufacturing studios for Disney cartoons?” His account seems to assume that this new collective endeavor is inherently leveling or dehierarchizing in its social effects. As such, the potential of cinema and film theory for Imamura lies partly in their capacity to force an awareness of the new social energies implicit in this new machinic consciousness—thinking via the camera, socially.

Already we can detect a potential source of trouble in his approach: because contradiction and conflict are not situated within production or within Japan (they are subsequently situated between Japan and America), this new machinic consciousness will tend to be channeled into national consciousness, into the “people,” and the reformation of Japanese modes of expression. Yet such a national populist outcome may not be inherent in or preordained by his approach. It is imperative then to work through the different registers and tendencies of Imamura’s film theory, to investigate how the social energies of this machinic consciousness become shunted into national reformation or “conservative revolution” via cinema.
Imamura places so much emphasis on the subjective side of documentation, writing for instance that “every document is an expression of some preexisting thought,” that we are at a loss about how to take into consideration the objective side of cinema, not to mention its materiality. The very idea of objectivity is called into question, or at least, the priority of objectivity is. Consequently, there isn’t much machine to Imamura’s intimations of a machinic consciousness. Not surprisingly perhaps, he ultimately finds Dziga Vertov’s efforts to “document the camera’s movement” in *A Man with a Movie Camera* to be rather dull. A paradox arises: Imamura clearly thinks that cinema and the movie camera differ from other arts and modes of expression, yet he gives such priority to subjective expression, consciousness, and thought that his film theory is in danger of ruling out any form of materiality, verging on pure idealism. Indeed he is quick to conflate a de facto observation (filmmakers always have some thoughts about what they are filming) with a de jure situation (filmmakers *should* always organize their thoughts in writing before beginning to film).

It is here that Imamura turns to composition, construction, or structure (*kōsei*). This is also where Imamura situates the materiality of cinema in his essay on documentary film, almost by default—*kōsei*. But what sort of materiality is this *kōsei*, this composition or construction? Imamura stresses the importance of writing a script before filming, and in fact, if he finds *Man with a Movie Camera* dull, it is because the film is not clearly structured or solidly composed. Generally speaking, in this context, Imamura sees composition as a process of clarifying and strengthening one’s thoughts, and at the end of the essay on documentary film, he proposes the science film as a possible model. Although his examples, comparisons, and general discussion initially introduce a somewhat narrative or dramaturgical perspective, his characterization of composition ultimately steers away from fiction (and verbiage) toward scientific schematization, as if to compensate for the heavy emphasis on the subjective side of things in his critique of objectivity. In sum, a sense of objectivity is sustained, but largely at the level of a scientific mode of composition. Needless to say, such a move runs the risk of replacing or supplementing pure idealism with pure rationalism.

It is here that Imamura’s discussion of cartoons proves interesting alongside his documentary film theory. Although his book on documentary and his book on cartoons were published nearly at the same time (1940 and 1941, respectively), the publications hold the two approaches apart. Yet reading between the two accounts provides a way to consider
what sort of materiality is at stake in the suggestions for a machinic consciousness in Imamura’s documentary theory. For where his account of documentary downplays the camera and lingers on the ordering capacity of (written) composition, his theory of cartoons focuses on the decomposition and recomposition of movement afforded by photographic methods. Reading between the two accounts offers a way to address the fundamental question posed by Imamura: what does it mean to think via the camera?

Accounts of the effect of the movie camera on thought or subjectivity, which are often grouped under the general rubric of “apparatus theory,” thus afford some useful points of contrast with Imamura’s approach. Jean Baudry, for instance, highlights how the monocular lens of the camera tended to make one-point perspective into the operative convention for the organization of visual space in cinema.30 Jean-Louis Comolli provides a nice summary of this stance: “The camera is what produces the ‘visible’ in accordance with the system of ‘monocular’ perspective governing the representation of space: it is therefore in the area of the camera that we should seek, for the materials of cinema as a whole, the perpetuation of this code of representation and the ideology it sustains or reasserts.”31

Because of its mechanistic and deterministic tendencies, apparatus theory quickly met with a host of objections. Noël Burch, for instance, took issue with those who “decreed that the optical properties of the photographic lens (and hence the cinematic lens), a monocular technology arising directly from bourgeois ideology, were a kind of ‘original sin’ of the seventh art, a historical fatality adhering to its very being and that only disruptive practices could free it from.”32 Noël Carroll objects to the mechanistic determinism that “appears to envision each art form on the model of a highly specialized tool with a range of determinate functions. A film, play, poem, or painting is thought of, it seems, analogous to something like a Phillips screwdriver.”33

If something of apparatus theory has nonetheless persisted in film theory, it is not because of its mechanistic determinism but because of its promise to provide a way to move between material structures and subject formations. For instance, as Martin Jay reminds us in the context of art history, what we think of as Cartesianism is not simply a structurally determined outcome of the use of one-point perspective. It is the combination of one-point perspective with “Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy” that served to make Cartesianism appear to be “the dominant, and even totally hegemonic, visual model
of the modern era.” Similarly, when Laura Mulvey introduces Renaissance perspective into her account of the male gaze, it is part of an effort to ground Lacanian mechanisms of identity formation in the material structures of cinema. Or, when Comolli takes up Baudry’s notion of a basic apparatus, he highlights how economic demands and scientific developments conspired to transform the basic apparatus into an “ideological instrument.” In other words, one of the functions of apparatus theory has been to provide a sense of a material ground for analyses of subjectivity or ideology in risk of becoming overly rationalist or idealist. This is precisely the role that cartoons play in Imamura’s film theory: they promise a material ground for the subjective emphasis of his documentary theory.

Imamura’s film theory, which is deliberately, even stubbornly, contrary to expectations that documentary is objective while cartoons are fantastical, stresses subjective expression in the context of documentary, while his cartoon theory lingers on the realism stemming from photographic methods. In this respect, his cartoon theory appears not merely alongside his documentary theory. His cartoon theory affords a way to account for the material side of the machinic consciousness announced in, but eliminated from, the account of documentary film. In keeping with Imamura’s reversal of received ideas about cartoons and documentaries, the cartoon serves as the ground not only for documentary but also for cinema. Animation takes the place of the basic apparatus, and it is in cartoons that we will find the objective side or the machine side of what it means to think via the camera.

Significantly, where A Theory of Documentary Film opens with a discussion of theatrical spaces and the relation between drama and cinema, A Theory of Cartoon Film begins thus:

Histories of cinema usually begin in 1890 with Thomas Edison’s invention of the kinetoscope or in 1895 with the Lumière brothers’ development of the cinematograph. But the origins of cartoon films are much older. They go back as much as three hundred years prior to the kinetoscope and the cinematograph. The reason that today’s very short cartoon films have been able to become so cinematic in comparison with live-action cinema [shashin no eiga] can be explained by the fact that, historically, making drawings move preceded making photographs move. Imamura’s cartoon theory, then, begins not only with the history of cinematic apparatuses but also with the prehistory of cinema, with the history of optical toys and other devices for making moving images. In
other words, there is something akin to apparatus theory in Imamura, but that something is not the monocular lens. For Imamura, because moving images (ugoku e) emerged in the era of Newton’s classical mechanics and Descartes’s mathematics, moving images entail a transformation of individualized entities into quantified mechanistic series, which is similar to the division of labor in industrial manufacturing.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite this analogy between the Fordist assembly line and the series of images in cinema, in his discussion of Disney, Imamura resolutely separates the apparatus or techniques of animation from capitalism. For instance, when he poses the question that he feels absolutely crucial, of why cartoon films have developed on a large scale only in America, he muses that Lotte Reiniger’s silhouette animations and Ladislaw Starevich’s puppet films were very popular before the ascendency of Disney cartoons. What then explains the subsequent ascendency of Disney? Imamura acknowledges the importance of capital investment in Disney’s success, only to conclude: “We cannot explain it only on the basis of capital investment. Clearly, at the basis of such success were techniques that were more cinematic. Capital merely brought them to light.”\textsuperscript{39}

Consequently, Imamura submits, film theory and film reform should focus first and foremost on cinematic techniques and not on capital investment. In support of this separation of techniques and capital, he cites the fact that, before the bank put up the necessary funds for his production studio, Walt Disney was a poor artist living in an attic. But Disney had grasped one principle, Imamura explains: “The principle was that of drawing images strictly in accordance with movement as parsed with film photography [katsudō shashin]. This is what ‘animating’ is all about. If I may speculate a bit, it seems likely that he parsed movement through close observation of the dynamics of the actions of various animals and humans. And film photography is the only way to show all the stages of such actions in still images.”\textsuperscript{40}

In brief, Imamura imagines Disney capturing in drawings the movements of animals as captured with cinematic photography. Imamura then drops the question of capital investment, leaving us to fill in the blanks. Apparently, in light of his prior comments, techniques that are more cinematic will prove more attractive to capital, precisely because they enable greater quantification and mechanization of the production process. As such, when Imamura gives advice for rendering Japanese cartoons more cinematic, he apparently takes the side of capitalist development or modernization. This makes sense in a context that he has characterized in terms of underdevelopment. Yet the impasse of Japan’s
underdevelopment in cartoons cannot be resolved with capital according to Imamura. The underlying problem is that of machinic consciousness—how to think with the camera.

Imamura uses terms as diverse as aesthetics (bigaku), method (hōhō), technique (gijutsu and gikō), and principle (genzoku) to describe the technical and artistic level of filmmaking that demands attention prior to financial investment and industrial development. I have been somewhat insistently reading Imamura’s problematic with such terms as apparatus and machinic consciousness rather than, say, aesthetics. This is not because I think that aesthetics is beside the point. On the contrary, it is the fundamental point for Imamura. But there is nevertheless a technical inflection to his aesthetics, a profound concern for technical development, which I aim to highlight by recourse to such terms.

Imamura ends the first section of “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films” with this advice: “All in all, the lack of creativity in Japanese cartoon films is a befuddled reflection of the contradictions of contemporary Japanese painting. It would be a mistake to set aside an examination of such aesthetic problems and to think that, if we invested as much capital as the Americans, we could produce Japanese cartoon films. Such an approach would only make for duplications of Mickey Mouse and Popeye.”

In sum, in Imamura’s theory of cartoons, the question posed in his essay on documentary film—“how to think with the camera”—has transformed into a question about “how to overcome the contradictions of Japanese art,” and about which contradictions arise from the effects of the apparatus. His confidence in clear or rational thinking to bring order to the human use of the camera in the context of documentary film has given way to a concern for potential dissonance or resonance between camera and image, between photography and art. In effect, the camera is no longer a tool for conscious manipulation or a cause-and-effect mechanism under rational control. It is closer to an apparatus in the Foucauldian sense of dispositif, a kind of ethico-aesthetic or techno-discursive paradigm whose positive effects include modes of spacing that also entail truth effects and resistance—prior to the division of labor and capital unevenness but potentially complicit with them. In Imamura’s case, his discussion of cartoons will both acknowledge and resist a particular set of truth effects, those of Western painting as prolonged in photography, commonly associated with one-point perspective and Cartesianism.
Temporal Depth

For Imamura, photography defines the modern regime of visuality. He frequently reminds us of the challenge presented by the ubiquity of photography in contemporary Japan: “All around us mechanical techniques, not at all different from those in America, are developing; photography is flourishing, and everyone is learning to see things via photography [shashin ni yoru mono no mikata].” Photography is for Imamura the inevitable standard for producing modern visuality or perception. As such, photography in his film theory confronts the two fundamental problematics of modernity: modernization (developmental progress) and the modern (the experience of a temporal lag or rupture, of time out of joint). Modernity is above all a temporal problematic, positing a break between past and present, between tradition and modernity. But it is a tricky temporal problematic because modernity at once names the goal and the break. Modernization is a matter of progressive movement toward modernity as the goal, while the modern or modernist experience dwells on modernity as temporal rupture, as a relation between past and present that does not go away. As such, because it conjoins two different temporal paradigms (progress and rupture), modernity is always impossible, and always already here.

Imamura struggles with the tricky temporality of modernity in the context of photography. His account strives to resolve the problem of modernity in a fairly familiar, and in retrospect, rather predictable manner. While Imamura sees technological progress and industrial development as necessary and inevitable, he discusses them in terms of different national techno-aesthetic regimes. In other words, he lays out or redistributes the temporal problem of modernity in spatial, geopolitical terms. He writes, for instance: “The success of American cartoons is rooted above all in the characteristics of this country, where there are no long established traditions of art, and mechanical techniques are the mostly highly advanced. Due to the lack of constraining traditions, drawings are most confidently combined with photography.” In contrast, even though impressionist artists in France have moved painting closer to capturing the temporality of movement, Imamura concludes: “Nevertheless, insofar as not a single creator of cartoon films has appeared in France, we have to acknowledge the considerable and heavy constraints of its artistic traditions.”

This passing comment on the difference between America and France merits attention, because the essay otherwise gives the impression that
photography follows naturally and inevitably from Western oil painting. For instance, immediately after he suggests that there are limitations to French traditions of oil painting, Imamura shifts his attention to the realism of oil painting, which he feels verges on photography. He writes, “In the history of development of oil painting techniques, as we enter into modern painting, it became so realistic [genjitsushugi teki] and materialist [machiriaru teki] that it seems to possess a tendency toward relief carving [ukibori]. In other words, oil painting is the formative matrix [botai] of photography. Rubens and Rembrandt come to mind in this context. Oil painting itself steadily advanced, verging on photography of things [jibutsu no shashin].”

To summarize, modern Western oil painting tends toward or verges on photography, and yet, if we take seriously Imamura’s caveat about the lack of cartoonists in France being due to the constraints of its art traditions, oil painting does not automatically result in, or guarantee the advent of, photography. In other words, for Imamura, techno-aesthetic progress is a matter of tendency or potentiality rather than teleology or determinism.

It is interesting that Imamura describes this potentiality with the term ukibori, which refers to relief carving, embossing, or other techniques for raising the surface of the image to add a sense of dimensionality to it. This notion that shashin is able to capture something of the depth of things recalls Fukuoka’s discussion of practices and discourses related to shashin prior to the introduction of photography into Japan, whereby techniques of copper etching, sketching, and ink rubbing came to assure the fidelity of the relation between object and image. But Imamura makes no reference to such prephotographic shashin practices. Either Imamura is not aware of them or he is so intent on the contradiction between Western and Japanese artistic techniques that he omits such practices. In any event, even as he posits a contradiction between Western photography and traditional Japanese arts, his usage of the term shashin potentially implies a zone of noncontradiction to be discovered, which will be realized in the multipoint indexical capture discussed earlier.

In conjunction with the term ukibori, Imamura’s other examples give us a better sense of what kind of apparatus Imamura has in mind. In his evocation of impressionist art, for instance, Imamura calls attention to the capture of the transformations of an object over time: “It was surely Impressionism that first attempted a serious treatment of time within art. We may think of the Impressionist artist who tried to capture the essence of a haystack as it ceaselessly transformed with the changing
light as one who investigated time with images. An artist like Degas who strove to grasp the pose of a ballerina in an instant was also an investigator of movement-time [undo—jikan] in painting.45

In this instance as well, Imamura misses a potential connection between Western and Japanese art. After all, one important source for Degas’s posed ballerinas was the poses of dancers in Hokusai’s collection of block-printed sketches (manga); the first volume appeared in 1814.46 Volumes of Hokusai’s manga sketches and various nishikié (multicolored woodblock printing) circulated widely among European artists by the second half of the century, and the impressionists in particular made frequent reference to the photographic qualities of such art.47 Of course, the particulars of these intersections and convergences, such as Degas’s ballerinas being inspired by Hokusai’s sparrow dancers, were probably not known to Imamura. Yet neither prehistory of photography in Japan—neither Edo shashin nor Edo nishikié—would serve Imamura’s purposes, for his argument depends on establishing a contradiction between (Western) photography and Japanese arts—a contradiction that is to be overcome in cartoons. He is intent on the potential for the emergence of something entirely new from cartoons in Japan, which requires grappling with the effects of this cine-photographic apparatus.

Already in his brief account of impressionism, Imamura suggests that the photographic capturing of the temporal depth of something (or someone) entails a twofold procedure: it is not only a process of capturing something in the instant but also a process of capturing something instant by instant, as with Monet’s series of haystacks. Imamura’s sense of the photographic apparatus jives with Gilles Deleuze’s conceptualization of cinema as a mode based on “any-instant-whatsoever.”48 And like Deleuze, Imamura is concerned with temporal depth. But because Deleuze is interested in an experience of duration through and beyond the organizing of any-instants-whatsoever into a consistent cinematic body (the movement-image), he introduces another wrinkle—making for a threefold process, as it were—wherein stopping on the image releases or explicates the temporal potentiality folded into the cinematically organized twofold process of capturing instants and arraying them in series. For Imamura, however, the pressing concern is the production of clear, solid films whose consistency derives from the photographic apparatus. In effect, despite its reference to time, Imamura’s theory of “movement-time” is an effort to produce what Deleuze calls the movement-image, which happens in the form of national or “classical” cinema. It makes sense of course that Imamura, writing in the late
1930s in Japan, would be more concerned with the production of the movement-image and the politics of finding the people, while Deleuze, writing in the early 1980s in France, would be attentive to the emergence of the time-image and the politics arising when “the people are missing.”

Consequently, Imamura lingers on the rupture between tradition and modernity, between Japanese art and American cartoons. America is now defined as a land where nothing has troubled the full and confident use of photographic methods, while Japan is emerging as a site where photography stands in contradiction to received pictorial practices. As implied in Imamura's constant use of the term *ketsugō* (combination or unification), his film theory is intent on a synthesis that promises to resolve, overcome, or perhaps sublate the contradiction between painting and photography, between traditional Japanese artistic practices and modern American industrial cartoons. To ground such a synthesis, Imamura has to find within Japanese arts something analogous to, or consonant with, modern photographic methods, which will allow them to communicate. Insofar as he defines cartoons as “temporal painting,” he naturally turns to Japan's traditions of temporal painting. As we have seen, he must rule out prephotographic shashin and nishikie or ukiyoe, for there is already too much intercourse with the West implicit in these arts. And so, to find materials appropriate for Japanese cartoons, Imamura turns to picture scrolls (*emaki*) dating as far back as the twelfth century, pictorial maps of Kyoto (*Kyōto zue*) on folding screens from the Edo period, and acting techniques found in the nō theater, as described by Zeami Motokiyo in the late fourteenth century. His range of examples is exceedingly eclectic—bringing them together entails a good deal of historical decontextualization and media deterritorialization, as does the resultant sense of Japanese-ness implied in articulating their commonality.

To understand why and how Imamura chooses such examples, we must first note that his cartoon theory addresses two different aspects of animation under the aegis of “temporal painting.” On the one hand, he begins and ends with character animation, and his cartoon theory initially focuses on how to produce realistic movement of figures, objects, and characters. Indeed, as we have seen, his ideal for character animation is akin to rotoscoping. On the other hand, as the term *uki-bori* succinctly indicates, Imamura is concerned with the overall sense of depth to the image, with an emphasis on dimensionality. Although he does not refer to the multiplane-camera system per se, his examples make clear that he is addressing effects that came to be associated with
it. The second part of his essay opens with examples of American cartoons in which the images verge on photography:

In the recent cartoons of Disney and Fleischer, shading has been enhanced, imparting a sense of dimensionality, and coloring has become more nuanced, aiming for photographic reality. Take, for instance, the background for the ocean in the opening sequence of *Sinbad the Sailor* or the first scene of the desert in *Forty Thieves* (1937). The latter picture in particular might well be mistaken for photography. The silhouettes of the forty thieves appear running across the distant horizon. In the foreground are the scattered remains of a skeleton, and the depths of the undulating dunes, rendered with soft shading, are close to color cinema [see figure 13.5]. Such aspects are on par with *The Old Mill*.49

Imamura here refers to a series of recent cartoons, which were met with popular and critical acclaim: Disney’s *The Old Mill* (1937), Fleischer’s *Popeye the Sailor Meets Sinbad the Sailor* (1936), and Fleischer’s *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba’s Forty Thieves* (1937). He then refers us to Disney’s *Lonesome Ghosts* (1937) and *Hawaiian Holiday* (1937).

Disney’s *The Old Mill* is commonly credited as the first cartoon to use the multiplane-camera system, and Fleischer quickly followed suit with *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba’s Forty Thieves*, released just weeks before Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). These films were touted for the realism and dimensionality of their images due to the multiplane-camera system. Yet, as Imamura’s citations of other cartoons not directly associated with the multiplane system imply, efforts to produce such depth effects had long been under way, and the effects were palpable prior to the buzz about Disney’s multiplane-camera system. As such, Disney’s multiplane-camera system itself might be seen as an innovation upon the basic apparatus or invention of the animation stand used for cel animation, in which a camera fixed on a rostrum looks down through layers of painted celluloid.50 The animation stand, like rotoscoping, had come into usage much earlier and had already undergone a great deal of experimentation.

Indeed, Imamura’s account reminds us that these new effects of depth were not simply due to photographing through multiple celluloid layers or the use of the multiplane-camera system alone. The new effects were actually a result of sustained attempts to eliminate the sense of gaps between the celluloid layers, which is to say that the “artifacts” of the animation stand tended to disrupt the sense of a closed volumetric three-dimensional world. Eliminating such effects entailed a num-
number of techniques for regulating the relation between layers, such as the
classical shading and coloring of backgrounds, characters, and fore-
grounds; cinema-inspired effects of focal depth; and recalibration of re-
lations between layers between shots. While Imamura draws attention
primarily to artwork (shading and coloring), he also shows awareness of
how American cartoons rely on one-point perspective and scalar propor-
tions, for, when he contrasts these cartoons with Japanese *emaki* (pic-
ture scrolls), he comments that emaki “do not depict all parts equally as
in Western painting.”

Imamura addresses the effects of photography at two levels in car-
toons: character animation (decomposition and recomposition of move-
ment) and dimensionality (the overall depth effect of the image in volu-
metric terms). The realism of cartoons has to be realized at both levels
at once. Part of what makes Imamura’s account challenging comes from
the fact that he does not explicitly or operatively separate these two
levels, but instead treats them as two faces of the same problematic of
photography. It is as if rotoscoping and the multiplane-camera system,
for instance, were but two faces of the same photographic realism. This
assumption is what ultimately pushes him toward a theory of tempo-
ral depth: photography in cinema is a matter of both temporality and

Figure 13.5 Still from *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba’s Forty Thieves* (1937).
dimensionality, which are becoming more mechanized, scientific, and ubiquitous due to technical development and expansion.

Why then can’t Japanese cartoonists just use photography as the Americans do? Imamura does not provide any theorization of sociohistorical conditions, but, to understand his concerns, we have to think in terms of underlying persistent material conditions. While his account of documentary gives the impression that the problem of Japan’s temporal lag is largely a matter of subjectivity, Imamura doesn’t think that ideological awareness alone will resolve the problem. Subjective expression has to pass through the camera, through photography. In effect, his account encourages us to think in terms of sociohistorical development and material conditions, but these conditions are posited in a techno-aesthetic, perceptual register rather than in socioeconomic terms. As we have seen, Imamura suggests that treating the problem of Japan in purely economic terms will not resolve anything: Japan would merely replicate American forms of expression. The problem for him is deeper than or prior to the purely economic, the limited economy. Such a stance is not entirely at odds with Marxism, or at least, certain currents of Marxism, since Marx formulated a critique of political economy that comprised the social beyond the purely economic.

At the same time, because Imamura makes no distinction between the social and the national, the overall tendency of his cartoon theory is toward the naturalization of the Japanese nation. Japan tends to appear homogeneous, self-identical, and immutable. In this respect, Imamura’s film theory invites a variation on psychoanalytic, self-other dialectical reading in the manner of Slavoj Žižek: Imamura’s account projects even development, that is, untroubled, unfettered techno-economic progress, onto America, which guarantees the temporal unevenness of Japan. Why is temporal unevenness desirable? It is desirable because modernity itself is organized around temporal progress and temporal rupture, that is, temporal unevenness. By imputing developmental evenness to America, Imamura assures that Japan is a site of temporal unevenness, and thus of modernity itself—and maybe the site of modernity, beyond received configurations of modernity. America then is the past of modernity, and Japan the future.

Interesting enough, in this case, the excess that is imputed to the other in order to disavow it is temporal evenness, or what Walter Benjamin called empty, homogeneous time. Therein lies the challenge of Imamura’s cartoon theory: although it posits photography in American cartoons as the ideal apparatus for the production of temporal depth,
the theory simultaneously resists that temporal depth (as if aware that it is ultimately nothing more than empty homogeneous time), seeking a deeper temporal depth, as it were—a twisted, distorted, weird temporal depth. And the temporal unevenness of modernity suddenly appears materialized in ancient picture scrolls and drama, transmuted, cinematized.

When Imamura turns to picture scrolls, for instance, he first comments: “I said that cartoons are temporal paintings. Japanese emaki are probably the oldest, most refined form of art striving for temporality in painting. Like contemporary cartoons, emaki develop a story with images. It is surprising how close they come to the temporal techniques of cinema.” In other words, Imamura begins by establishing the aesthetic parity of cartoons and emaki. The source for this argument about emaki is probably Hosokibara Seiki’s general history of manga from 1924, *A History of Japanese Manga (Nihon mangashi)*, and as Ōtsuka Eiji points out, such a view of emaki only becomes possible once the conventions of modern cinema have been established and normalized. In Ōtsuka’s opinion, emaki are not the origin for modern manga. He argues instead that the cinematic sensibility established in the 1930s in Japan allowed critics and artists to project a sense of parity onto emaki and manga. The same may be said of Imamura’s account of emaki: if he sees emaki as analogous to cartoon films, it is because he is already reading emaki in cinematic terms.

Imamura also finds some points of difference between modern photography and emaki: “Seen from the standpoint of Western painting, many of the pictures appear utterly chaotic in terms of perspective. One scroll of a warship loaded with warriors, for instance, shows not just the side facing us but the side facing away as well. As a result, the ship looks oddly twisted. To borrow from Hinago Motoo’s discussion, it is exactly as if the artist had done a pan with a camera to show us both sides simultaneously.” Imamura concludes that showing two sides of an object on one surface, or upon a single plane, is exactly like the “mobile camera of cinema” (idō satsuei). Naturally, in keeping with Ōtsuka’s point, this is precisely what we might question: do emaki really strive to make different views and different realities commensurable within a single plane of expression? Usually, as in Mikhail Bakhtin’s account of the novel, bringing divergent realities into a single plane of expression is considered the hallmark of the modern. Here again we clearly see that Imamura’s film theory is resolutely modern and geared toward the present: he seeks divergence within the modern, not from it. As such, we need to think
of his examples of traditional arts as temporal oddities existing in the present, producing spatio-temporal warps upon the single plane of the contemporary.

Imamura’s account of pictorial maps of Kyoto agrees with that of emaki. In emaki he also finds temporal depth in discrepancies of the scalar or homogenous proportioning of space. The use of clouds to conceal insignificant parts of a building, for instance, is likened to temporal techniques in cinema such as fade-in, fade-out, and overlap.56 Regarding pictorial maps of Kyoto painted on large folding screens during the Edo period, he speculates that their tendency to run counter to perspective is related to the temporal styles of emaki:

Instead of overall spatial balance and proportion, the artists’ goal was to present distant sites in the same manner as nearby ones. A small theater in Sanjō Kawara, for instance, had to be drawn as large as the Shimizudera temple complex. What was distant and what was close had to be shown in the same way. As a result, techniques of perspective run haywire. A path may become wider and wider as it goes from foreground into the distance. The image is clearly not drawn from the standpoint of equalizing spatial proportions; rather such techniques are designed to allow for temporal progress related to narrating—and explaining—things here and there in Kyoto. The picture scroll form seems to be one that rejects pictorial space in favor of narrative time.57

Imamura reads what diverges from one-point perspective in traditional Japanese arts as evidence of a form of temporal depth that is analogous to the photography of cinema. In the end, the temporal depth of art is transformed into a narrative force, and his cartoon film theory finally joins his documentary film theory. Cartoon theory has allowed Imamura to ground his documentary theory in the material apparatus of photography. The documentary theory approached cinema from the subjective side, proposing a solid script (scientific or schematized) in the place of an apparatus. Cartoon theory, approaching cinema from the materialist or objective side, finds the ground for schematized writing in the material effects of the photographic apparatus. Cartoon theory and documentary theory meet at the level of narrative, but narrative is now an effect of temporality and dimensionality of cinema, rather than a subjective structure imposed upon reality with the camera.

Imamura’s attention to the temporality and dimensionality deriving from the use of photography in cartoon films has enlarged the apparatus of film beyond the deterministic mechanism of the camera and into
a dispositif, that is, an apparatus-paradigm or diagram: the transscriptive apparatus. Photography does not commit cinema to objective documentation due to linear indexicality or referentiality. Photography instead suggests modes of transcription, in which multipoint indexicality allows for a form of realism. What is new or novel about Imamura’s form of photography-centered realism is that, because it has passed through the crucible of cartoons, it entails plastic, elastic, and vitalist realism. Consequently, in Imamura the deformative potentiality of animation is not the antithesis of realism, nor is it a fantastical compensation for what Eisenstein called the “heartless geometrizing” and “formal logic of standardization” of capitalist modernity. Cartoons become the past and future of realism for moving images.

Coda: Imamura Today

If many aspects of Imamura’s film theory feel conservative, restrictive, or plainly fascist today, we should recall that his film theory was never intended to be revolutionizing, disruptive, or anarchic. It was reformative in impulse. Whatever revolutionary potential it discovered, it tended to harness to the national cause, in the service of national reformation geared to international rivalry. Imamura’s film theory aimed to make Japanese cartoons that would compete with American cartoons in the international market. Not surprisingly then, after the start of the Pacific War, Imamura would frame that rivalry in fully militarist terms: “The former superiority of Disney cartoons as art lay in their superiority as weapons for propaganda warfare. In them we can see how fine art may play a powerful role in enlightening the public. If we are unable to produce cartoons like those of Disney, we will be overpowered.”

In his recent discussions on Imamura’s film theory, Ōtsuka Eiji characterizes it in terms of fascism and reminds us that this impulse of film theory cannot be comfortably relegated to the past. Ōtsuka situates contemporary otaku culture as the direct heir to 1930s fascism, casting his net wide while singling out the films of Studio Ghibli as direct heirs. After all, Studio Ghibli was responsible for the republication of Imamura’s Theory of Cartoon Film in 2005, and the Ghibli director and producer Takahata Isao builds directly on Imamura’s discussion of cartoons and emaki in his book on twelfth-century Japanese picture scrolls as the origin on Japanese animation. Ghibli’s aesthetics is clearly a bid to establish a national aesthetic.

Yet Imamura’s film theory is not nationalist or fascist in tendency
simply because it explicitly aims to produce a national cinema. Nor can we effectively resist such fascist aesthetics by focusing attention on those thinkers or artists who adopt nationalist discourse, localizing the problem in specific individuals. Rather, as Imamura’s theory attests, even if the theories or practices of specific individuals provide a point of departure for raising questions, the problem of resisting fascism entails more than identifying who adopts national allegiance or militarist discourse. The political challenge of Imamura’s cartoon theory lies in how it opens the question of the production of cinema beyond the purely economic and into the social, and then strives to ground the production of the social in techno-aesthetic paradigms, that is, in the production of bodies rather than subjects. In effect, he is opening a physiology or “somatics” of power prior to ideology and subjectivity. “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films,” for instance, offers this odd and potentially disruptive analogy:

Among the techniques of nō drama and puppet theater that had a profound impact on kabuki performance, there are also a couple of significant principles that Japanese cartoons films must adopt. As Watsuji Tetsurō has pointed out, in puppet theater, substantial reality lies in the material body of the puppet. Because the puppeteer manipulates the puppet only with his fingers, the performance is exceedingly limited, largely directed into movements of the head and shoulders. The principle of the cartoon film is precisely the principle of puppet theater. Like the puppet, the image that is drawn sheet by sheet is but the material body. If manipulation of this material body is to impart the feeling that it is alive, one must select only the most distinctive actions. As in photography, in cartoons it is not possible to capture all movements equally, so it is necessary to draw the viewers’ eyes only to the most significant movements of the actor. Close observation of Disney’s animals confirm that the repetition of simple operations similarly has complicated effects on us. If you look at that Donald’s action, for instance, the operation consists almost entirely of him wagging his rump back and forth.

Ultimately, however, it is at this level that his theory shows its tendency toward corporatism. For Imamura shows absolutely no interest in non-localized movement in animation. He consistently ignores any movement, temporal or dimensional, that cannot be localized in a body. Prior to his bid for enlightening the masses with animation, Imamura effectively pushed the transcriptive apparatus of cartoons into the produc-
tion and mobilization of operative bodies. Indeed there can be no national propaganda or militarist propagation without such bodies.

Yet, in pushing the theory of cartoons toward the formation of bodies before subjects, Imamura highlights a central problematic for the study of animation today, perhaps inadvertently: insofar as the transcriptive apparatus of cartoon film entails multipoint capture, we begin to see how cinema indexes its own movement. This is what makes for the self-indexical worlds of cinema, whose generation and propagation become so salient in cartoons. If we do not constrain the use of the transcriptive apparatus to the localization of movement in operative, cooperative bodies, other cartoon worlds are still possible.

Notes

1. See Hansen, “Of Ducks and Mice,” for a discussion of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s very different takes on Disney cartoons.
2. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 137. All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.
3. On the pure film movement, see Bernardi, Writing in Light; Gerow, Visions of Japanese Modernity; and LaMarre, Shadows on the Screen.
4. On “overcoming modernity,” see Richard Calichman’s introduction to, and translation of, the wartime conference entitled Overcoming Modernity at which Japanese scholars and writers addressed the impasses of modernity in Japan.
5. Irie, “Approaching Imamura Taihei.”
6. Ōtsuka, “An Unholy Alliance of Eisenstein and Disney.”
7. For instance, some of the points made in “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films” appear in the final section of A Theory of Cartoon Film called “Cartoons and Japanese Art,” while other parts of the argument appear in his sections on painting and on cartoons in general. A translation of the final section in the revised edition of A Theory of Cartoon Film was published as “Japanese Art and the Animated Cartoon.” This is not only one of the rare translations of Imamura but also (as far as I know) the first into English. Michael Baskett recently published two translations, an essay on documentary film and a section on sound in cartoons, both of which I cite here. Nonetheless, I rely primarily on “For the Sake of Japanese Cartoon Films” because this essay, in its brevity, makes Imamura’s basic arguments about cartoons and connections between them more lucidly and concisely than the book, which is after all a compilation of essays.
8. The Project on Toy Films website lists a cartoon film entitled Kaeru kenpō (Iwao Ashida, dir., 1933), which is probably the film that Imamura cites as Kaeru no kenpō.
9. Imamura uses a series of different terms that can be translated as “picture” or “image,” “drawing” or “painting.” I have chosen sometimes to translate kaiga as “drawing” and sometimes as “painting” (although in some contexts it might
equally well be glossed “art”) in order to convey the nuance of his argument. I translate e sometimes as “drawing” and sometimes as “image.” He later introduces the term eizō, which refers more specifically to images associated with mechanical reproduction, but which I translate simply as “image.” Because of the potential difference in nuance in different contexts and my shifts in translation, I often include the Japanese term.

15. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 140.
17. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 141.
27. Imamura, “A Theory of Film Documentary,” 56.
29. See Driscoll, “From Kino-Eye to Anime-Eye/Ai”; and Furuhata, “Rethinking Plasticity,” for additional accounts of the politics of production in Imamura’s film theory.
32. Burch, Life to Those Shadows, 162.
38. Imamura Taihei, Imamura Taihei eizō hyōron 5, 5.
40. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 143.
41. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 147.
42. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 146.
43. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 144.
44. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 145.
45. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 144.
46. See Wichmann, “Degas,” in Japonisme, 26–33.
50. See LaMarre, “Animation Stand,” in The Anime Machine, 12–25. The distinction between innovation and invention comes from James Utterbeck, as discussed by David Nye in Technology Matters, 33.
51. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 151.
52. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 150.
53. Ōtsuka, “An Unholy Alliance of Eisenstein and Disney.”
54. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni.” 150. In adapting his discussion of emaki in the book A Theory of Cartoon Film, Imamura omits this reference to Hinago Motoo and associates this technique with double exposure rather than panning.
55. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in The Dialogic Imagination, 291–92. In addition, in “Superflat and the Layers of Image and History in 1990s Japan,” Thomas Looser directly addresses the question of whether multiple perspectives within an image should be considered as evidence of different layers of realities or different realities. A similar question emerges in the context of magic lanterns and nishikie. See LaMarre, “Magic Lantern, Dark Precursor of Animation.”
56. Imamura, “Nihon manga eiga no tame ni,” 151.
60. Takahata, Jūni seki no animeeshon.
61. Imamura appears to be drawing on Watsuji Tetsurō’s essay “Bunrakuza no ningyō shibai,” Shisō (August 1935), which is reprinted in Watsuji Tetsurō zenshū 17, 309–15. The term keigai is used to stress the materiality of the doll or puppet body, and jittai to indicate its substance or reality.
63. Put another way, building on my ideas for how we might open the analysis of animation, Imamura is only interested in “closing” compositing, avoiding the issue of the nonlocalized movement related to compositing. See LaMarre, “Compositing,” in The Anime Machine, 26–44.