

Enchanting the Hearts of Taisho Japan: Why did Japanese Audiences Fall for the Films of Bluebird Photoplays?

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Abstract

In this paper, I will analyze the high popularity with one small film company, Bluebird Photoplays, among Japanese moviegoers during late 1910's and 1920's. A subsidiary of Universal operating from 1916 to 1919, Bluebird has long been considered as just one of its many branches by American film scholars, while Japanese film scholars have strongly advocated its importance. It was the most popular film company in Japan at the time, and it had a strong influence on the Westernization of the Japanese film industry. The question I seek to answer in this paper is the following: "why did this small company enchant audiences, especially the Japanese?"

First, I will discuss characteristics of the company. In the 1910's the transition to feature-length films started, and the movie fan culture emerged with the increase of female moviegoers in the United States. Bluebird was an attempt by Universal to respond to this new trend; it revealed the policy of producing and distributing one five-reel feature film every week while focusing on the quality of the film. In addition, it emphasized the "clean" image of its films-, probably in order to appeal to new audiences, including female and children.

Then, I will focus on the reception of Bluebird films in Japan. I will point out both the external and internal factors by which Bluebird gained popularity in the Japanese film market. First, I will discuss the achievement of Universal's Japan branch and Kobayashi Kisaburō, who managed the movie theater and showed many Bluebird films in his theater. Then, I will consider Japanese film magazines and the theater pamphlet *Daiichi Shinbun* to examine the voices of audiences at the time. Their real opinions suggest the reason why Bluebird films captured the hearts of Japanese audiences.

Introduction

One American film company, Bluebird Photoplays Inc. occupies a unique position in silent film history. Its name has been almost forgotten in American film history for a long time while Bluebird has been mentioned as one of the most important film companies in Japan.⁽¹⁾

The American film industry experienced significant changes in the 1910's. After D.W. Griffith's feature film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was an economic success and caused a debate over its representation of black people, the American film industry realized the potential of feature length film and the necessity to define cinema's own position in the cultural arena. Lee Grieveson describes the year 1915 for the American film industry as follows: "the purpose of providing 'harmless' and diversionary entertainment to diverse audiences becomes increasingly central

(1) For example, Richard Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005) does not have an entry on Bluebird (only mentioned once in the description of Japanese exhibitor-producer, Kobayashi Kisaburō). Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928. Vol.3, History of the American Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), also does not mention Bluebird. However, Bluebird has been gaining attention from feminist film scholars recently since it produced many films directed by women. Mark Garrett Cooper, *Universal Women: Filmmaking and Institutional Change in Early Hollywood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), mentions Bluebird frequently in describing early Universal activities. On the relation between Bluebird and its female directors, also see Yuki Irikura, "Burūbādosya no chōsen: katsudō no hensen to sannin no josei kantokutachi" [The attempt of Bluebird Photoplays: Its historical transition and 3 female directors], *Eizōgaku*, no. 103 (2020): 73-90.

to the goals of the film entrepreneurs and to the self-definition of the mainstream industry.”⁽²⁾

The head of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company, Carl Laemmle also needed to move with the times although he believed in shorts and serials and predicted that the trend of feature length film would be a temporary phenomenon.⁽³⁾ He then founded some subsidiary companies which produced or distributed only feature length films.⁽⁴⁾ Even though the production of feature films was increasing,⁽⁵⁾ short films still made up 90% of film production in the United States in 1915, so Laemmle’s decision to establish these small companies focused on feature films seemed to be reasonable. One of them was named Bluebird which operated from 1916 to 1919. Its basic policy was to produce and distribute one five-reel feature film every week while focusing on the quality of the film.⁽⁶⁾

Its films were distributed not only in the United States but also in Japan around the same time and Bluebird became the most popular film company in Japan. It is said that Bluebird had a strong influence on “Pure Film Movement (Jun eigageki undō)” led by Kaeriyama Norimasa, a movement, which propagated the westernization of Japanese cinema. In addition, it is also said that Bluebird’s young and beautiful actresses were central to abolishing the tradition of using Onnagata, in which male actors played female roles, and encouraged the use of female actors in Japan.

“Why did this small company attract Japanese moviegoers?” This is the question I aim to answer in this paper. In the first part, I discuss the relationship between Bluebird and the American film industry during the 1910’s and the characteristics of the company. In the second part, I introduce the existing research on Bluebird by Japanese film scholars. Then I focus on Japanese film magazines and *Daiich Shinbun*, which is the first movie theatre pamphlet in Japan. These precious primary sources helped me approach the actual audience experience at the time. Through this paper, I argue that three issues were crucial in making Bluebird films successful in Japan: the timing of when these films were released in Japan, their content and how it was portrayed by its specific star personas, as well as specific compatibility with local practices that made the films particularly relatable to Japanese audiences.

1. American Cinema in the 1910’ s and the Emergence of Bluebird

1-1. Quality of Bluebird Films

Quality, with a capital ‘Q,’ will be the predominating characteristic of all the productions which bear the trademark of Bluebird Photoplays, Inc., and it is emphatically asserted by one of the founders of the organization.⁽⁷⁾

On the establishment of Bluebird Photoplays Inc. in January 1916, it first declared that they would focus on the Quality of the feature film. The general manager of Bluebird, M. H. Hoffman talks about the characteristics of Bluebird in three points: 1) The promotion and deliveries of the films are carefully and effectively supervised. 2) Utilizing the equipment of Universal city, the studio in New Jersey, the Universal players, and the Universal exchanges all over the country. 3) A jury of 15 exhibitors will be organized to judge the completed production.⁽⁸⁾ Then Hoffman declares:

By this method of selection Bluebird will be, as far as the allied human judgment of the jury can determine, a feature that is assured of successful exploitation immediately it comes under the Bluebird brand.⁽⁹⁾

(2) Lee Grieveson, “1915: Movies and the State of the Union,” in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Charlie Keil and Ben Singer (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 158.

(3) Carl Laemmle, “Doom of Long Features Predicted,” *Moving Picture World*, July 11, 1914, 185.

(4) Besides Bluebird, he founded Broadway, Red Feather, Butterfly and Jewel, which were all focused on feature films.

(5) Grieveson, 143.

(6) “New Feature Organization Announced,” *Moving Picture World*, December 25, 1915, 2336.

(7) *Ibid.*

(8) “M. H. Hoffman Talks on Bluebird,” *Moving Picture World*, January 15, 1916, 402.

(9) *Ibid.*

In 24 January 1916, Bluebird Photoplays released its first film *Jeanne Doré*, produced by Éclipse, a French film company. It was the film based on the play written by Tristan Bernard and starred Sarah Bernhardt who appeared in the film for the first time after the surgery amputating her right leg. She played the protagonist, the poor mother who tries to save her son from the death penalty but does not succeed. Her acting style was very dramatic and theatrical. Bluebird got the right to show the film in the United States and released it as “the first Bluebird film.” Since it was not a film actually produced by Bluebird, this release could be understood as a pronouncement of Bluebird that they are going to produce artistic films like *Jeanne Doré*. One week later *The Secret Love*, the first film produced by Bluebird was finally released. Its story was based on the novel *That Lass O’ Lowrie’s*, written by Frances Hodgson Burnett (the female writer known for the novels *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*) and starred the stage actress, Helen Ware. Then the release of *Undine* directed by the well-known artistic director, Henry Otto, and *Hop, the Devil’s Brew* directed by Lois Weber who was one of the top directors at Universal at the time, followed. Bluebird kept the weekly release plan until the end of the company in 1919.

From these first releases, it becomes obvious that Bluebird focused on three points to maintain the Quality of its films: 1) Use of talented actors with both theatrical background and film stars. 2) Use of experienced popular directors. 3) Adaptation of popular novels or theatrical plays. Especially, the scenario based on the novel or play became the core policy of Bluebird. From late 1916, Bluebird started to use the famous phrase in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* “The Play’s the Thing” to advertise the company.⁽¹⁰⁾ Bluebird expressed the policy that the script, or the original novel and the play dominate over any other factor in the film production.⁽¹¹⁾

1-2. The Star System and Bluebird

From the early 1910’s, the star system gradually emerged in the United States before Bluebird was established in 1916. Universal made Florence Lawrence America’s first film star.⁽¹²⁾ The theatrical background actress, Lawrence began her career in the film industry with an Edison film in 1907. Then she moved to the Vitagraph, and later to the Biograph Company. There, she became famous, not under her own name, but as “the Biograph girl.” Because of the Biograph policy of player anonymity, the audiences could not know the name of the Biograph actors they favored at least until 1913. Her demands on the Biograph management grew, and she was fired with her husband Harry Solter. Carl Laemmle, who had just started the Independent Motion Picture Company (IMP, the precursor of Universal) hired both of them. Then he fabricated the story of Lawrence’s death in a streetcar accident. The news was widely announced, followed by her resurrection in the publicity tour in St. Louis on 25 March 1910. Laemmle also inserted the advertisement “We Nail a Lie” in *Moving Picture World* and *The Billboard*. Here, he introduced another fictional story that Lawrence’s death was created by the enemies of IMP.⁽¹³⁾ Because IMP was one of the independent companies, this campaign was not just Laemmle’s new attempt but also could be considered as an action against the Edison’s Trust.

While Laemmle prompted the emergence of the star culture, Bluebird did not follow in his path. It revealed the policy not to choose the actor by his or her fame. The general manager of Bluebird, Hoffman declares:

....regardless of whether or not the player was a star or even a well-advertised name, we have proven that Shakespeare was right. With Bluebird the play will always be “the thing.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Not because they were stars did Bluebird employ these fine artists, but because their talents and temperaments fitted best into the roles that were assigned to them...Being encumbered with no contracts with extraordinary paid stars Bluebird has been free to choose its own casts and promote its own interests.⁽¹⁵⁾

(10) For example, see the advertisement of *Motion Picture News*, August 26, 1916, 1234.

(11) “Bluebird Is Going to Prove The Shakespeare Was Right,” *Motion Picture News*, September 30, 1916, 2049.

(12) On Lawrence’s biography, see Kelly Brown, “Florence Lawrence,” *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-florence-lawrence/> [accessed May 18, 2020].

(13) “We Nail a Lie,” *The Billboard*, March 12, 1910, 29; “We Nail a Lie,” *Moving Picture World*, March 12, 1910, 365.

(14) “Bluebird Is Going to Prove The Shakespeare Was Right,” 2049.

Bluebird did not treat the actors as film stars. It attached much importance to the story and demanded the actors to be the character, fit for the story. Thanks to this policy, some young unknown actors, especially actresses, could have the opportunity to play the main characters in Bluebird films: Unknown actress Mary MacLaren was chosen by the director Lois Weber to play the poor protagonist Eva in *Shoes*. Ella Hall was given the opportunity to play the pure heroines in many Bluebird films which fit her temperament. A young Australian actress, Louise Lovely was introduced to the American screen through Bluebird films. These new players brought freshness, happiness and emotionality to the Bluebird films.

However, this policy did have problematic side. Since Bluebird did not have long contracts with the players, they also were shown in the films produced or distributed by Universal or its subsidiaries. Especially Jewel Productions Inc. and the Special Attractions became rivals of Bluebird. Jewel was founded as one of the subsidiaries of Universal in 1917, and it focused on distributing feature films. On the other hand, the Special Attractions was the series of feature films produced by Universal, which used its star players. The actors who became famous in Bluebird films were picked up for these new approaches of Universal. Bluebird had to give up their brilliant actors and keep finding new talents. Furthermore, company's policy of producing five-reel films probably began to be unfit for the time's trend because many companies started to produce big scale films, which had big budgets, and dramatic narratives with more than five-reel films.

1-3. The Emergence of Female Audiences

Nickelodeons, the first movie theaters in the United States, emerged around 1905. They offered entertainment at a cheaper price than the vaudeville theatres and their main audiences were working-class and immigrants. Female audiences and children followed, and they gradually constituted an important part of the audience in the nickelodeons.

In addition, in the early 1910's the construction of movie theatres started, which were bigger, more elegant and, safer than the conventional nickelodeons. Eustace Ball wrote about the change in the audience in 1913 in his book:

Where five years ago the attendance of the moving picture show by well-to-do people was considered a "slumming expedition," it has now become a standard amusement at which wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the best classed in America are the most devoted patrons.⁽¹⁶⁾

As the moving pictures were gradually accepted as a standard entertainment, the film companies and the exhibitors aimed to expand the audience into the middle-class, who preferred to watch films with more complex stories in a more comfortable environment.

While the exhibitors prepared the theatre environment, the film companies started to produce the feature length films, which had more dramatic narratives and psychologically complex characters. The Vitagraph started to produce "the Quality films" which adopted the literary, biblical, and historical materials. Shelly Stamp points out:

By 1913, outfits like the Famous Players Company, the Lasky Feature Play Company, and Bothworth, Inc., were formed solely to produce lavishly designed, upscale photoplays for cinema's growing bourgeois audience and serious dramatic films began to outweigh comedies on American screens for the first time.⁽¹⁷⁾

Universal also started to produce feature films. For instance, in 1913, the six-reel film so called "white slave film," *Traffic in Souls* was released by Universal. The white slave film, in which young women in town are seduced

(15) "Bluebird Celebrates its First Birthday," *Motion Picture News*, January 20, 1917, 420.

(16) Eustace Ball, *The Art of the Photoplay* (New York: Dillingham, 1913), 116.

(17) Shelly Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

by villains into prostitution, became extremely popular in parallel with a white slave panic during early 1910's in the United States. The narrative often suggested young women's social and economic autonomy with moral corruption and sexual pollution. The sensation of white slave film in the United States was a temporary phenomenon only during the early 1910's.⁽¹⁸⁾ Interestingly, the majority of the audience of these films were young women.⁽¹⁹⁾ Stamp points out that the white slave films offered young women the opportunity to experience the urban underworld without any harm while they represented young women's victimization.⁽²⁰⁾

Movie fan culture as another facet catering mainly to female audiences emerged during this period. Fan magazines, like *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (first published in 1911) and *Photoplay* (in 1912), started to be published in the early 1910's. At the same time, promotional items began to be sold in the movie theatres. For instance, pictures of the actors, their calendars, or even spoons embossed with the likeness of picture players were sold.⁽²¹⁾ This fan culture was mainly supported by female audiences.⁽²²⁾ The increase of female moviegoers encouraged a change in the image of movies from the cheap and obscure amusement to the healthy mass entertainment favorable for every kind of American citizens.



Figure 1: The advertisement of Bluebird (*Moving Picture World*, 3 March 1916)

Under these circumstances, Bluebird revealed a policy to value female audiences. In order to make the company and its films appealing to women, Bluebird used the advertisements featuring feminine handwritten illustrations, and sometimes included positive comments from exhibitors. One exhibitor from Ohio says: “We found them uniformly clean, meritorious, well played and all the productions are excellent.”⁽²³⁾ The image of its advertisement, that people of all ages and both sexes are walking to the movie theatre, is the image that Bluebird aimed to earn for its films (Figure 1).

Through emphasizing the clean and healthy images of its films, Bluebird aimed to attract new audiences, young women and mothers who might bring their children. Yamamoto Kikuo points out that a characteristic of Bluebird was its conservative attitude apparent in the films. According to Yamamoto, it repeatedly starred Pollyanna-like pro-

(18) On a white slave panic in the nation, see Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls*, 41-101.

(19) *Ibid.*, 52.

(20) *Ibid.*, 94-101.

(21) *Ibid.*, 22.

(22) On the importance and increase of female movie fans, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 101-125, 242-294; Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls*.

(23) “Bluebirds Have Arrived,” *Moving Picture World*, March 3, 1917, 1280.

tagonists and emphasized traditional values: moral or spiritual values or the importance of the family.⁽²⁴⁾ Bluebird films were not sensational like *Traffic in Souls*, while it was already known that this type of films attracted young women. Instead, it tried to produce the wholesome quality films, which would bring happiness to all generations.

2. The Reception of Bluebird Films in Japan

2-1. The Evaluation of Bluebird in Japan

The reputation of Bluebird was built quickly and independently in Japan. Ishimaki Yoshio wrote the book *Ōbei oyobi nihon no eiga shi* [Film history of the West and Japan] in 1925.⁽²⁵⁾ He set up the section “Brū bādo eiga” [Bluebird Films] in the chapter on the American film in the golden age. He describes the Bluebird film as “the film of poetry or a chain of beautiful poems” and defines them as the group of films opposed to the American comedies or serials which were also popular during the period.⁽²⁶⁾ He emphasized the achievement of one of the Bluebird’s directors Rex Ingram who later directed *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) starring Rudolph Valentino. Ingram directed 8 films under Bluebird of which he also wrote the scripts. Ishimaki also points out the appeal of its actresses. He describes Ella Hall, Myrtle Gonzalez, Violet Mersereau and Louise Lovely as Bluebird’s four flowers. While his book was mainly written by his memories and some descriptions are not accurate, it nevertheless reveals the impact Bluebird films had in Japan.

In 1951, Futaba Jūzaburō wrote *Amerika eiga shi* [American film history]. He also set up the small section “Brūbādo eiga” and describes its feature as the sentiment (he used the Japanese word, *Jōcho*), and its poetic representation.⁽²⁷⁾ He points out that many kinds of Bluebird films were produced at the time but now the name Bluebird means the group of lyric films (he used the Japanese word *Jojōgeki*) which shows the beauty of humanity.⁽²⁸⁾ From the description of Bluebird by Ishimaki and Futaba, it is clear that they thought that Bluebird was an important film company in the United States because of its popularity in Japan. This is particularly interesting because it is difficult to find similar discourse on Bluebird in American film history written by American film scholars.

Other Japanese film scholars like Ījima Tadashi, Tanaka Junichirō, and Yamamoto Kikuo also mention Bluebird in the discourse of Japanese film history. They point out the impact of Bluebird films on the “Pure Film Movement.” Ījima sees the similarity between the Bluebird films and the Japanese “pure films.” The first “pure film” was *Sei no kagayaki* [The Glow of Life] (1918) directed by Kaeriyama Norimasa in which he used actress Hanayanagi Harumi. Ījima points out that the story of three young Japanese in the eternal triangle had very similar and common plots to the Bluebird films.⁽²⁹⁾ He also says that other “pure films” like *Miyama no otome* [Maid of the Deep Mountains] (1918) and *Awaremi no kyoku* [The Song of Sorrow] (1918) also represented the story of the romance of a young couple in the beautiful nature. The images of young love and beautiful nature mainly come from the Bluebird films directed by Lynn F. Reynolds. His Bluebird films starred Myrtle Gonzalez and always contained beautiful nature scenes.⁽³⁰⁾ While Tanaka defines Bluebird as a second-class film company compared to Lasky, Triangle and Metro, he analyzes its appeal as follows:

Bluebird films were...the cheerful human-interest dramas which showed romantic stories with the young and naïve protagonists who dream of a good life, and avoided the gaudy settings and actors. American serials and comedies which were full of thrill and suspense, were good...but they did not fit to the Japanese sense. The naïve sentiment in the Bluebird films evoked the young moviegoer’s sympathy.⁽³¹⁾

(24) Kikuo Yamamoto, *Nihon eiga ni okeru gaikoku eiga no eikyō: hikaku eigashi kenkyū* [Influence of foreign films on Japanese films] (Tokyo: Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 1983), 53-56.

(25) Yoshio Ishimaki, *Ōbei oyobi nihon no eiga shi* [Film history of the West and Japan] (Ōsaka: Puraton Sya, 1925), 148-150.

(26) *Ibid.*, 148.

(27) Jūzaburō Futaba, *Amerika eigashi* [American film history] (Tokyo: Hakusui Sya, 1951), 79.

(28) *Ibid.*, 79-80

(29) Tadashi Ījima, *Nihon eigashi jōkan* [Japanese film history vol.1] (Tokyo: Hakusui Sya, 1955), 19-30.

(30) They collaborated in 7 Bluebird films: *The Secret of the Swamp*, *The Girl of Lost Lake*, *God’s Crucible*, *Mutiny*, *Southern Justice*, *The Greater Law*, and *The Show Down*.

Yamamoto followed Tanaka's point of view. In his book, he also discusses the characteristics of Bluebird in detail and shows their influence on Japanese films. He concludes Bluebird itself to be a minor film company, which produced conservative films

Through the conventional studies of Bluebird by Japanese film scholars, the films themselves seem to have been underrated while the influence on the "Pure Film Movement" was emphasized. However, the uniqueness and the quality of Bluebird have recently begun to be reevaluated not only by Japanese film scholars but also by American film scholars. To indicate the significance of Bluebird, it is important to understand the reception of Bluebird films in Japan. In the following sections I will focus on audience experiences from the time.

2-2. The Import and Introduction of Bluebird Films into Japan

In an activity period of approximately three years, Bluebird produced about 170 films and around 140 of them were distributed in Japan. In 1916, Thomas Cochrane, Universal's representative for the entire Orient, partnered with Harima Katsutarō, who was running a traveling show as well as a hotel business.⁽³²⁾ They founded Harima-Yunibāsaru Shōkai [Harima-Universal and Company] and decided all Universal films released in Japan after 1st July 1916 had to be distributed through Harima-Yunibāsaru.⁽³³⁾ It imported a total of more than 120,000 feet of films every month. Under these circumstances, together with Universal's shorts and serials, many Bluebird films were imported into Japan since Bluebird was a very new subsidiary of Universal.

Many Bluebird films, which were imported into Japan through Harima-Yunibāsaru, were released in the first-run movie theatres like Asakusa Teikokukan (discussed below), Tokyo-Kurabu (in Asakusa) and Ginza Konparukan.⁽³⁴⁾ They were different from Misemonogoya, which were cheap and obscure show houses and in which the films were shown as a part of the amusements. On the other hand, these new movie theatres were constructed only for showing films and offered a more comfortable movie-going experience to the audiences.⁽³⁵⁾

Most Bluebird films, however, were released in the Teikokukan which was directly-managed by Kobayashi Kisaburō. Kobayashi founded Kobayashi Syōkai [Kobayashi and Company] and actively introduced western films to Japan.⁽³⁶⁾ Because Kobayashi had a personal connection with Universal's Cochrane, he might have had the privilege of introducing Bluebird films in his theatre. In addition, they both were involved in the film magazine business. According to Tanaka Junichirō, Cochrane told Kobayashi about the importance of advertisement in the movie showing business and advised him to partner with the film magazines in order to advertise the films he was going to show.⁽³⁷⁾ Kobayashi followed his advice. He first supported *Katsudō Shashin Zasshi* (first published in 1915) and then *Katsudō no Sekai* (first published in 1916). He used these film magazines as the place to introduce his new imported films and show his opinions about the movie showing business. Then, both Kobayashi and Cochrane were inducted as the counsels of the new film magazine *Katsudō Hyōron* which was first published in December 1918. The editor in chief of *Katsudō Hyōron* was Mori Tomita, who was the manager of Teikokukan at the time, and the publisher

(31) Junichirō Tanaka, *Nihon eiga hattatsushi I: Katsudō shashin jidai* [Development of Japanese cinema I] (Tokyo: Chūōkōron Sya, 1975), 258-259.

(32) Though Harima's activity was manifold and important in the early moving picture business in Japan, his whole career remains unknown. Keiko Sasagawa, "Umi wo watatta kōgyōshi Harima Katsutarō: 20 seiki shotō no ajia eiga shijō ni okeru Shingapōru to Nihon" [Channeling between Singapore and Japan: Kastutarō Harima in the early Asian motion picture industry], *Kansai Daigaku Bungaku Ronsyū*, vol. 64, no. 4 (2015): 23-47, focuses on his activity in Singapore.

(33) After Harima passed away, Harima-Yunibāsaru was managed only by Cochrane and he changed the company name to Yunibāsaru Firumu Seizō Gaisya Tokyo Shisha [Universal Film Production Tokyo Branch].

(34) According to Mamoru Makino, "Burūbādo natsukashi Ginza Konparukan" [Good old Bluebird in Ginza Konparukan], *Eiga gaku no michi shirube* (Tokyo: Bunsei Shoin, 2011), 131, the main audiences of Konparukan were office workers and students who had a good education.

(35) We could think that the theatre transition, similar to the United States, was also happening in Japan during 1910's.

(36) Kobayashi was already well-known in the Japanese moving picture business as the exhibitor who succeeded in introducing the French serial *Zigomar*. For details on his activities as an exhibitor and a producer, see Ryōichi Tajima, "Kōgyōshi no jidai to Kobayashi Kisaburō" [The era of exhibitors and Kobayashi Kisaburō], in *Nihoneigashi Sōsyō 15: Nihoneiga no Tanjō*, ed. Kenji Iwamoto (Tokyo: Shinwa Sya, 2011), 241-272.

(37) Junichirō Tanaka, "Hikō nihon eiga dai 20 kai [Special feature about Japanese film, No. 20]," *Kinema Junpō*, Late April 1966, 37.

was placed at the Teikokukan. Therefore, *Katsudō Hyōron* was basically the support magazine of the Teikokukan.⁽³⁸⁾

In addition, Bluebird films sometimes were released in the Teikoku Gekijō (Imperial Theatre), which was a western style theatre founded in 1911. It was the most prestigious theatre in prewar Japan, for both theatrical plays and film exhibitions. The first Bluebird film introduced in Japan was *Bijintō* [Undine (the 3rd film released under the Bluebird brand)] and it was released in the Teikoku Gekijō on 26 August 1916.⁽³⁹⁾ Yamamoto Naoki explains this special release of the Bluebird film as follows: “Because it had the honor of being premiered at the Imperial Theater, Bluebird gave the false impression among Japanese filmgoers that it was the brand name for a company that produced high-class American photoplays comparable to the ones by Triangle or Metro.”⁽⁴⁰⁾

Around the same time, the break-out of World War I in 1914, seriously affected the European film industry and American films started to enjoy their expanding markets in the World. The European films imported into Japan decreased sharply during this period and American films occupied the place instead. Because Universal founded the branch office in Japan prior to other American film companies, its films swept the country. These new American films, including many Universal films, were welcomed by Japanese audiences. However, there were also people who missed European films, which had more artistic sense than American films. Ogawa Sawako points out: “The consensus between the audiences who could not forget European films and the critics who appreciated lively American films was Bluebird.”⁽⁴¹⁾ So in which ways did Japanese audiences find something artistic in Bluebird films?

2-3. Bluebird in Japanese Film Magazines

In the 1910’s many film magazines were published in Japan and we can easily find the articles mentioned Bluebird films in the famous film magazines at the time: In *Katsudō no Sekai*, the review of *Undine* was included.⁽⁴²⁾ The first issue of *Katsudō Gahō* (January 1917), the pictures of *Shoes* occupied one page. The readers also actively discussed the films in the magazines: The correspondence column “Murasaki Sumire [Purple Violet]” in *Katsudō Gahō*, the readers frequently talk about Bluebird films. For example, one reader named Akatorisei (“Red Bird” in Japanese) from Kobe criticizes the changes of Bluebird films in 1917:

Lyric films produced by American film companies tend not to have profound sense, but Bluebird films seemed to be different and I loved them....However, Bluebird films released recently were nothing but conventional. It is the degradation of Bluebird.⁽⁴³⁾

This reader does not explain how Bluebird films has changed. However, his comment suggests that at least early Bluebird films gave him the impression that they were different from other American films.

Interestingly, we can also find the name Bluebird in the local film magazines. *The Kinema Times* is a film magazine, which was first published in December 1916 in Nagasaki. In the issue of 9th July 1917 (Figure 2), there is a feature article named “Impression Romance of Blue Bird Photoplays / Brūbādo eiga no omoide.” In this article, 5 readers express their love for Bluebird in their own words. One reader, Yoshihiko remembers when he first watched *Bijintō* [Undine], and says that the best Bluebird film he has ever seen is *Numa no himitsu* [The Secret of the

⁽³⁸⁾ Universal also took account of the advertisement in film magazines. They published their own film magazine *Universal Weekly* (Shortly changed the name to *Moving Picture Weekly*) and inserted many advertisements in the film magazines like *Motion Picture News*, *Moving Picture World*, and *Photoplay*.

⁽³⁹⁾ According to Toshio Yamanaka and Yoshinobu Tsukada eds., *Brūbādo eiga no kiroku* [Record of Bluebird films] (Private edition, 1984), *The Love Girl* (September 22, 1916), *Danger Within* (October 17, 1918), *My Little Boy* (March 26, 1918) were shown in the Teikoku Gekijō, besides *Undine*.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Naoki Yamamoto, “Where Did the Happiness of Bluebird Fly? Bluebird Photoplays and the Reception of American Films in 1910’s Japan,” *ICONICS International Studies of the Modern Image*, vol. 10 (2010): 155.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Sawako Ogawa, “1910 nendai no hikaku eigashi kenkyū: syoki eiga kara kotenteki eiga eno ikōki ni okeru eiga keishiki no keisei to tenkai” [Research in comparative film history in the 1910’s: Formation and development of filmic form in the transitional era, from early cinema to classical cinema], (PhD diss., Waseda University, 2012): 69.

⁽⁴²⁾ “Bijintō.” *Katsudō no Sekai*, October 1916, 134.

⁽⁴³⁾ Akatorisei, “Burūbādo no saikin eiga ni tsuite” [On recent Bluebird films], *Katsudō Gahō*, September 1917, 184.



Figure 2: The feature article (left) and the cover (right) of *The Kinema Times* (9 July 1917)

Swamp]. He explains the attractions of Bluebird films in 3 points: 1) The beautifully designed intertitles, 2) Their charming sentences, 3) The beautiful tone / color of the picture.⁽⁴⁴⁾ He also compared Bluebird films with Italian films: “In Italian films, the images on a screen seem to be solemn and lonely. On the contrary, Bluebird films seem to be particularly bright, pretty and alive.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ The other reader named Shimizusei says that when he watched one Bluebird film *Ai no kettō* [Bettina Loved a Soldie], he sees the similarity with the films of Pathé, a French film company which also had the American branch.⁽⁴⁶⁾ He thinks that the attractions of Bluebird films are their skillful way of shooting and their talented actors.⁽⁴⁷⁾ He then continues: “The films themselves are beautiful and clear, and they represent good stories focused on humanity...On the stories of Bluebird films, I think that they tend to represent the tragic family drama with a love story or the classic comedy.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ There is also one reader named Midori in the article who talks about Lois Weber’s Bluebird film *Shoes*⁽⁴⁹⁾. Because of the pen name and the writing style, this reader seems to be a female. Bluebird films might attract not only to young male moviegoers but also female audiences, though more research is required.

In another film magazine, *Yunibāsarū* [Universal], which was first published in 1925, there are some articles that featured Bluebird though the company itself was not active anymore (Bluebird finished producing films in the spring of 1919). In October and November issues of 1926, there are articles titled “Omoide natsukashi seichō eiga [Good Old Bluebird Films].” Here, Hisae Kyōshirō organized the history of Bluebird with its films and its actors.⁽⁵⁰⁾ In the issues of February and April 1927 (Figure 3), there are articles focused on Lois Weber, one of the female directors of Bluebird and the top director of Universal.⁽⁵¹⁾ In the issue of May 1927 (Figure 3), the memorial article of Lynn F. Reynolds who passed away the same year is included.⁽⁵²⁾ Reynolds was one of the most popular Bluebird directors and created the main image of Bluebird films in Japan as mentioned above.

Through the comments from the readers of film magazines, it becomes obvious that the feature articles on

(44) “Impression Romance of Blue Bird Photoplays / Brūbādo eiga no omoide.” *The Kinema Times*, July 9, 1917, 8.

(45) Ibid.

(46) Ibid., 9. He does not mention the reason why he felt the similarity exactly.

(47) Ibid.

(48) Ibid.

(49) Ibid.

(50) Kyōshirō Hisae, “Omoide natsukashi seichō eiga” [Good old Bluebird], *Yunibāsarū*, October 1926, 48-50; December 1926, 40.

(51) Junnosuke Tō, “Natsukashiki burūbādo no yume: joryū kantoku to yu-sya no ima mukashi (1) Roisu Webā no hanashi” [Memories of Bluebird: Now and then of female directors and Universal (1) The story of Lois Weber], *Yunibāsarū*, February 1927, 66-68; Ryūzō Usuki, “Natsukashiki burūbādo no yume: Joryū kantoku to yu-sya no ima mukashi (2) Roisu Webā no hanashi” [Memories of Bluebird: Now and then of female directors and Universal (2) The story of Lois Weber], *Yunibāsarū*, April 1927, 65-67.

(52) Ryūzō Usuki, “Ikeru Reinoruzū” [Reynolds has passed away], *Yunibāsarū*, May 1927, 43-46.

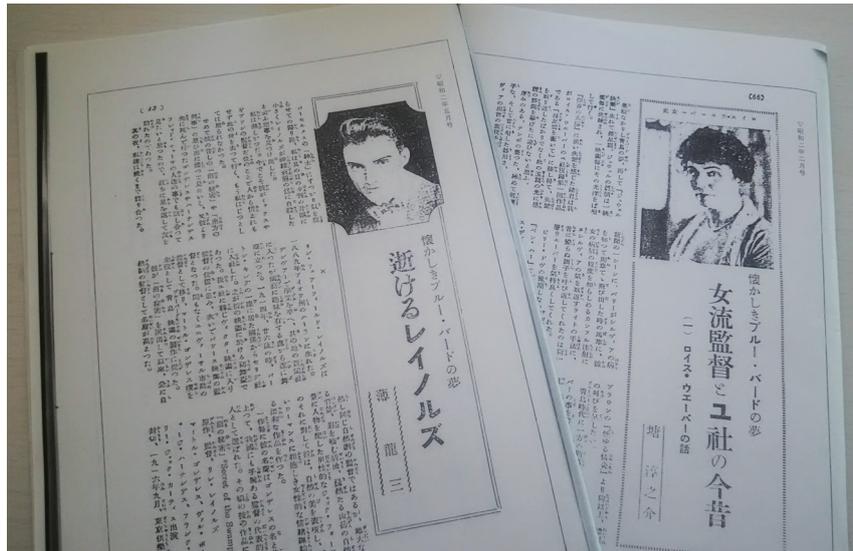


Figure 3: The article on Weber (Right, *Yunibārsaru*, April 1927) and on Reynolds (Left, *Yunibārsaru*, May 1927)

Bluebird were frequently included and many readers responded to them, even after the company had stopped producing films. Bluebird films remain as “the good old memories” for the readers, and they appraised Bluebird films for their beauty.

2-4. The Audiences of the Teikokukan: *Daiichi Shinbun*

The theatre program, *Daiichi Shinbun* (Figure 4) shows us more vivid audience experience of Bluebird films. *Daiichi Shinbun* was the Japanese first movie theatre pamphlet, published by the Asakusa Teikokukan. During the 1910's and 1920's, the Asakusa area of Tokyo had been the central place for the movie showing business in Japan. Many moviegoers went to Asakusa to watch new movies and the Teikokukan was one of the most popular theatres in this area. It showed western films and became a road show theater of many Universal films, thanks to Kobayashi and probably to his connection with Universal's Cochrane. After Lois Weber's Bluebird film *Shoes* was shown at the Teikokukan in 28 October 1916, it became the theatre, specializing in Bluebird films. At the same time, it started publishing the weekly theater pamphlet named *Daiichi Shinbun*. It was comprised of letters from audiences besides information about the films to be shown in the Teikokukan next week. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to access the early issues of *Daiichi Shinbun* now because they were small programs which were printed to rough papers, and most of them are considered to be lost. However, I had the opportunity to research the *Daiichi Shinbun* in the issue from of May 1917 to October 1919 (with some issues missing).⁽⁵³⁾

Daiichi Shinbun tells us how the showing of Bluebird films was managed in the Teikokukan: 1) Almost every week one new Bluebird film was shown during this period. 2) “The Bluebird Film Festival” was held several times at the Teikokukan. 3) The usual program of the Teikokukan during the time was composed of several short films from 1-3 reels and one feature length film. Bluebird films covered the feature length film in the program.

One audience-member named Akaihanasei writes about the appeal of Bluebird films in the issue of 17 May 1919 of *Daiichi Shinbun*:

The reason why Bluebird films have such a high reputation these days is that they have excellent settings and skillful shootings. In addition, there is no film as good as Bluebird at showing nature in film...It is said that Bluebird films are small scale and are like short poems and that their scripts are simple. However, their smallness and simplicity are the core value of Bluebird... Bluebird films are good at putting the essence of a poem compared to other films. And Bluebird has respect for expressing the truth and for selecting the actors who have

⁽⁵³⁾ I appreciate Professor Hiroshi Komatsu letting me access his personal collection for my research in *Daiichi Shinbun*.

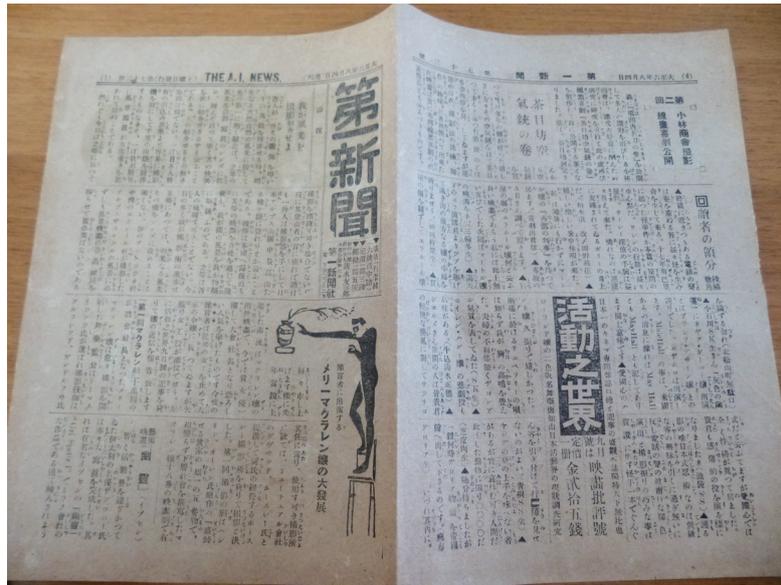


Figure 4: *Daiichi Shinbun* published by the Teikokukan

the right personality and character. That attitude makes the films very natural and adds artistic value to the film. And Bluebird actors have the highest reputation among other actors.⁽⁵⁴⁾

It is interesting that this audience-member pointed out that Bluebird films are small scale pieces and that their smallness and simplicity are the appeal of Bluebird. As the reader named Yoshihiko who compared Italian films and Bluebird film in *The Kinema Times*, the audience-member Akaihanasei here also distinguishes Bluebird films from conventional western films by using the words “small and simple.” As Ogawa points out, Japanese audiences might have accepted Bluebird films as the alternative to artistic European films.⁽⁵⁵⁾ On the other hand, the comments of the reader and the audience show their feelings to us: They felt that Bluebird films were different from conventional European and American films. They might have preferred to see something they could feel closer to, rather than seeing something very dramatic or sensationial.

In addition, many audience-members of *Daiichi Shinbun* point out the good chemistry between Bluebird films and the local practice of having a Katsudo Benshi. A Benshi is the live narrator of the film, a practice which existed throughout the period of silent film in Japan. They created the narration by themselves and some Benshi had very high popularity. It is said that people went to the movie theatre to see and listen to the narration of their favorite Benshi rather than watching the film itself. In the Teikokukan, the chief Benshi of the theatre, Ikoma Raiyū was the most popular Benshi for Bluebird films. The audience-member named Yanasei estimates that Ikoma’s passionate narration gave the films additional flavor.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Another audience-member named Aotorikyō (“Crazy for Bluebird” in Japanese), writes passionately to Ikoma:

I feel happy when I only hear the name Ikoma Raiyū. Seriously, the Bluebird films are your soul. Nothing beats your narration of Bluebird films. It is inexpressible how happy I am when I watch the Bluebird films with your narration.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Ikoma is also well-known for the narration of one Bluebird film *Nanpō no hanji* [Southern Justice], ended with the phrase “Haru ya haru, haru nanpō no rōmanse [Spring, Spring, Spring, The romance of the south].” (According to

(54) Akaihanasei, *Daiichi Shinbun*, May 17, 1919, 1.

(55) Ogawa, “1910 nendai no hikaku eigashi kenkyū,” 69.

(56) Yanagawasei, *Daiichi Shinbun*, June 22, 1918, 4.

(57) Aotorikyō, *Daiichi Shinbun*, February 1, 1919, 4.

Tanaka, the phrase itself was created by other Benshi, Hayashi Tenhū.)⁽⁵⁸⁾ Besides Ikoma, positive comments to the Benshi of the Teikokukan, named Tamai and Naitō are also found in *Daiichi Shinbun*.

It seems that the theater staff also realized the importance of the Benshi when they showed the Bluebird films. The feature article titled “Eiga to setsumeisya [The Film and the Narrator]” written not by the audience-members but probably by the staff from the Teikokukan says:

the skill of the narrator has a direct influence on the audience’s impression of the film. Especially, films like Bluebird which have a melodious atmosphere are affected strongly.⁽⁵⁹⁾

These comments suggest that the small, poetic, and simple Bluebird films were the most flexible films that could accept the free narrations created by the Benshi. In Japan, Bluebird films gained the unique atmosphere thanks to the Benshi’s narration and had the privileged fame to have been talked about from generation to generation.

2-5. Bluebird Actresses in Japan

Both the readers of the film magazines and the audience-members of the Teikokukan talk about talented actors of Bluebird films. In 1973, Sugiyama Shizuo talked about his memories of Bluebird actresses in *Kinema Junpō*:

I was very impressed by *Numa no Syōjo* [The Girl of Lost Lake] and *Dokuryū* [Shoes]. I still remember the romance, the sweet sentiment, and clean and beautiful heroines of the films, Myrtle Gonzalez (The heroine of *the Girl of Lost Lake*) and Mary MacLaren (*Shoes*). In addition, Ella Hall, Violet Mersereau, Ruth Clifford and other beautiful Bluebird flowers became my childhood idols. Mersereau and Gonzalez even responded to my fan letters written by poor English and sent me their portraits.⁽⁶⁰⁾

The famous film critic Yodogawa Nagaharu also talked about his childhood memories of Bluebird films and their actresses in conversation with other film critics.⁽⁶¹⁾ He said that the heroines of Bluebird films were not born into the world of wealth and privilege. They were in working-class and trying to make their dreams come true. In other words, they were the embodiments of the American dream. The comments from early film critics show that the generations who were enthusiastic at Bluebird films still remember their favorite actresses.

In *Daiichi Shinbun*, there is an article titled “Yunibārsaru yon meika no ohako [The Character Type in which Universal’s Four Flowers Play].” Here, four Bluebird actresses are mentioned. The writer describes the images of the characters which they tend to play in the Bluebird films:

Mary Maclaren plays the roles who go to work by the cheap train, having the purple lunch box in her hand. Violet Mersereau plays the actress who is not in the first place but in the lower position. Myrtle Gonzalez plays the village girl who cuts the woods and brings them to the village. Ella Hall plays the girl who lives and works in slums.⁽⁶²⁾

This comment also emphasizes that Bluebird actresses mainly played working-class heroines.

Most Bluebird actresses who were idols in Japan seem not to be remembered by American audiences. During 1910’s the star system began to develop in the United States. The most famous star was America’s sweetheart Mary Pickford. Pickford stayed in the same type of character: “The young girl or adolescent whose vitality, beauty, and

⁽⁵⁸⁾ Tanaka, *Nihon eiga hattatsushi I: Katsudō shashin jidai* [Development of Japanese cinema I], 322-323.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ “Eiga to setsumeisya” [Film and narrator], *Daiichi Shinbun*, April 27, 1918, 1.

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Shizuo Sugiyama, “Brūbādo no karen na sūrin no hana” [Bluebird’s lovely flowers], *Kinema Junpō: Nihon eiga sakuhin zensyū*, a special number 11.20, 1973, 281.

⁽⁶¹⁾ Nagaharu Yodogawa, Kōichi Yamada, and Shigehiko Hasumi, *Eiga senya ichiya ge* [Arabian Night of cinema vol.2] (Tokyo: Chūō Bunko, 2000), 219-232.

⁽⁶²⁾ “Yunibārsaru 4 meika no ohako” [Universal’s 4 flowers and their favorite characters], *Daiichi Shinbun*, June 16, 1917, 4.

charms enable her to overcome whatever challenges she encounters. Her characters often come from humble backgrounds and might get married or become wealthy but always remain true to themselves and others.”⁶³ It seems that Pickford’s characters are similar to the Bluebird heroines. They are pure heroines, who start from the position of the poor, and find happiness at the end. However, one difference remains. Pickford’s character never takes the wrong path for her happiness. She remains the good girl throughout the story. However, Bluebird’s heroines often choose a wrong way to get out of harmful situations, then realize what they have done and correct their attitude: Eva (Played by Mary MacLaren in *Shoes*) decides to sell herself to buy a new pair of shoes. Midge (Played by Dorothy Phillips in *Broadway Love*) works as a chorus girl. She experienced the luxurious life but realized the emptiness at the end. Carolyn (Played by Myrtle Gonzalez in *Southern Justice*) is seduced by a sophisticated gentleman who actually is cheating on the villagers. She realizes his lie at the end and goes back to her fiancé. Connie (Played by Ruth Clifford in *The Game’s Up*) comes to the city to become a painter but life is not easy. She lies to her country friend visiting her that she is a successful painter and enjoys a rich life.

Bluebird’s heroines are pure but at the same time show the foolishness or toughness when they try to get over a problem by themselves because they somehow understand that this world is not easy to live in. Though many Bluebird films have happy endings, which means that the knight on a white horse appears in front of them at the end, we see the struggles of working-class girls before they are rescued, and that might make the audiences cry or sympathize with the heroines.

Japanese audiences felt that Bluebird’s heroines were most attractive. They were more real than any other heroines in the conventional European or American films. They were not like Italian divas, had more natural acting style compared to French (Pathé) films, and were not completely pure like Mary Pickford. Because many young Japanese moviegoers also came from the country side and were struggling in the big city while having big dreams at the same time, they might have felt strong sympathy for the Bluebird heroines.

Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on the characteristics of Bluebird and its unique reception in Japan. Bluebird was an attempt of Universal to regularly produce feature length films of stable quality. Interestingly, Bluebird tried not to follow the policies of Universal’s head Carl Laemmle, probably in order to establish its own identity, different also from other Universal subsidiaries focusing on feature films. Bluebird made an appeal for new audiences: women and children, including middle-class audiences. It created the image of its clean and healthy films through its advertisements and the stories which were based on literature or theatrical drama. In addition, it avoided the introduction of the star system, which emerged during the early 1910’s in the United States. Many young unknown actors (especially actresses) had the opportunity to play in Bluebird films. As such, Bluebird can be considered as one of the unique attempts in the transitional era of the American film history even if it had to come to an end in 1919.

The fact that Bluebird was given a privileged position by Japanese audiences and Japanese film critics is noteworthy. For a long time, Japanese critics have discussed the importance of Bluebird while they criticized the smallness or the conservative attitude of its films at the same time. The discourse of Japanese film critics suggests that they considered Japanese audiences at the time to have been less sophisticated than American audiences and had favored second-rate films, which did not win the same reputation in the United States.

However, the comments from the readers of Japanese film magazines and the audience-members of the Teikokukan show us that they consciously preferred Bluebird’s smallness, the simple stories and their actresses showing real-life characters to any other films during the period. In addition, the narrations of the Benshi created a meaningful chemistry with Bluebird films. Because Bluebird films had a kind of poetic atmosphere which other western films did not have at the time, the Benshi could create a unique harmony with their free narrations.

Here, we can return to the reasons why Bluebird films could attain such high reputation in Japan during the time in three points. 1) The timing: Bluebird films were able to dominate the Japanese film market during the late

⁶³ James Latham, “1918: Movies, Propaganda, and Entertainment,” in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Charlie Keil and Ben Singer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 220.

1910's thanks to the establishment of Universal's branch office in Japan prior to other American film companies as well as the collapse of the European film market caused by WWI. 2) Its content: Japanese audiences preferred Bluebird's simple stories, showing the naïve emotion, and its pure but tough characters struggling in life. Bluebird actresses, while not part of a promoted star system succeeded to evoke stronger sympathy with their characters among Japanese audiences, than those in artistic European films or other American films at the time. 3) The combination with local Japanese practices: The use of the Benshi added another layer of emotional response for audiences that connected well with the perceived lyricism of the Bluebird films.

Were Bluebird films just some old-fashioned films or were the Japanese audiences at the time less sophisticated than the American audiences, as conventional evaluations have suggested? I believe this paper helped to answer these questions. It revealed that the Japanese audiences understood the characteristics of Bluebird films correctly and they chose to support Bluebird over other western films. It is well known that Bluebird strongly influenced the Japanese original genre "Home Drama" and the early works of Ozu Yasujiro and Naruse Mikio who have worldwide reputation today. We should now stop to dismiss Bluebird as a second-rate film company, which has been completely forgotten in silent film history. Rather, it is important to reevaluate its originality and its attempts from a multilateral point of view.

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