
Useful Experimental Cinema: USIA's Experimental Film Programming and the Film Culture in Taiwan, 1973–1979

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Abstract

This article attempts to historicize the United States Information Agency (USIA)'s programming of experimental and student films in the sixties and early seventies. Previous scholarship mainly focuses on USIA-produced films during 1962-1967; it is argued that these films demonstrated that USIA was ideologically tolerant and allowed artists to express their creativity. Complementing this viewpoint, I suggest that it is fruitful to situate USIA's film activities within a larger media environment and understand their programming and production choices as a way to respond to controversial films put out by Hollywood and other private media producers. The second part of the article turns to the receptions and reuses of the USIS-exhibited student and experimental films in Taiwan. Although these films and other cultural products were employed by the USIA to advance the US government's interests overseas, these were also a major source for international intellectuals and artists experiencing new art forms. Here I use Taiwan as an example to show the various ways non-western audiences received and reused USIS-exhibited films. In the case of Taiwan, we can see that when the Taiwan government was creating an experimental film festival to support the local film industry, the USIS-exhibited films became a crucial resource for Taiwanese cinephiles and critics to imagine and theorize experimental cinema.

On March 30, 1973, the United States Information Services (USIS) hosted a film screening at Lincoln Center in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan.¹ Screening films was not an unusual task for the USIS, which set up a film division in Taiwan in March 1946,² only seven months after the Japanese empire surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. The division offered films, equipment, and sometimes lecturers to any organization or club that wished to host a screening.³ The films shown at that time were newsreels of WWII battles and documentaries about US society. The topics included development of agriculture and heavy industry, wartime production activity, democracy, and development of music education in the United States. Some of these films already featured voiceovers in Mandarin, but not in Taiwanese Hokkien, the language spoken by the majority of the Han population residing on the island. Others had voiceovers in English or Japanese, which indicates that at this point, the US government had not produced films that specifically targeted Taiwanese audiences.

US officials might have been reusing films they made during the war that were aimed at either the Chinese people who were still fighting the war in mainland China or their Japanese foes. These films were used as an instructional tool for Taiwanese audiences, either to teach the previously colonized Taiwanese people what the war really looked like and how the Allied Forces had fought for their freedom or about the new leader of the Asia Pacific: The United States.

The USIS screening that happened almost thirty years later was very different. The audiences saw neither newsreels nor educational films. According to reporter Xie Zhengguan [Figure 1]⁴ — writing for one of the few Taiwanese film magazines at the time, *Yingxiang*, which modeled itself after

the British magazine *Sight and Sound*—the event was to show “experimental film” (*shiyan dianying*⁵ in Mandarin). The films shown that night were *Matrio* (1970), *Options* (1969), *Feasting* (1968), *Tempest* (1968), *Tomo* (1969), *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop* (1969),⁶ *Fulton Street*, and *Toten* [sic] (1962).⁷ *Incident*, *Options*, *Feasting*, and *Tomo* were made by students.⁸ The screening was an eclectic combination of experimental film (*Matrio*, *Options*, *Feasting*, *Tempest*, *Toten*), drama (*Incident*), and documentary (*Tomo*, *Fulton Street*). The films not made by students were produced by established artists, such as Frank Olvey and Robert Jones Brown (*Tempest*), and Ed Emshwiller (*Toten*). The former were affiliated with the E.A.T. art group, and the latter was an accomplished painter and filmmaker.

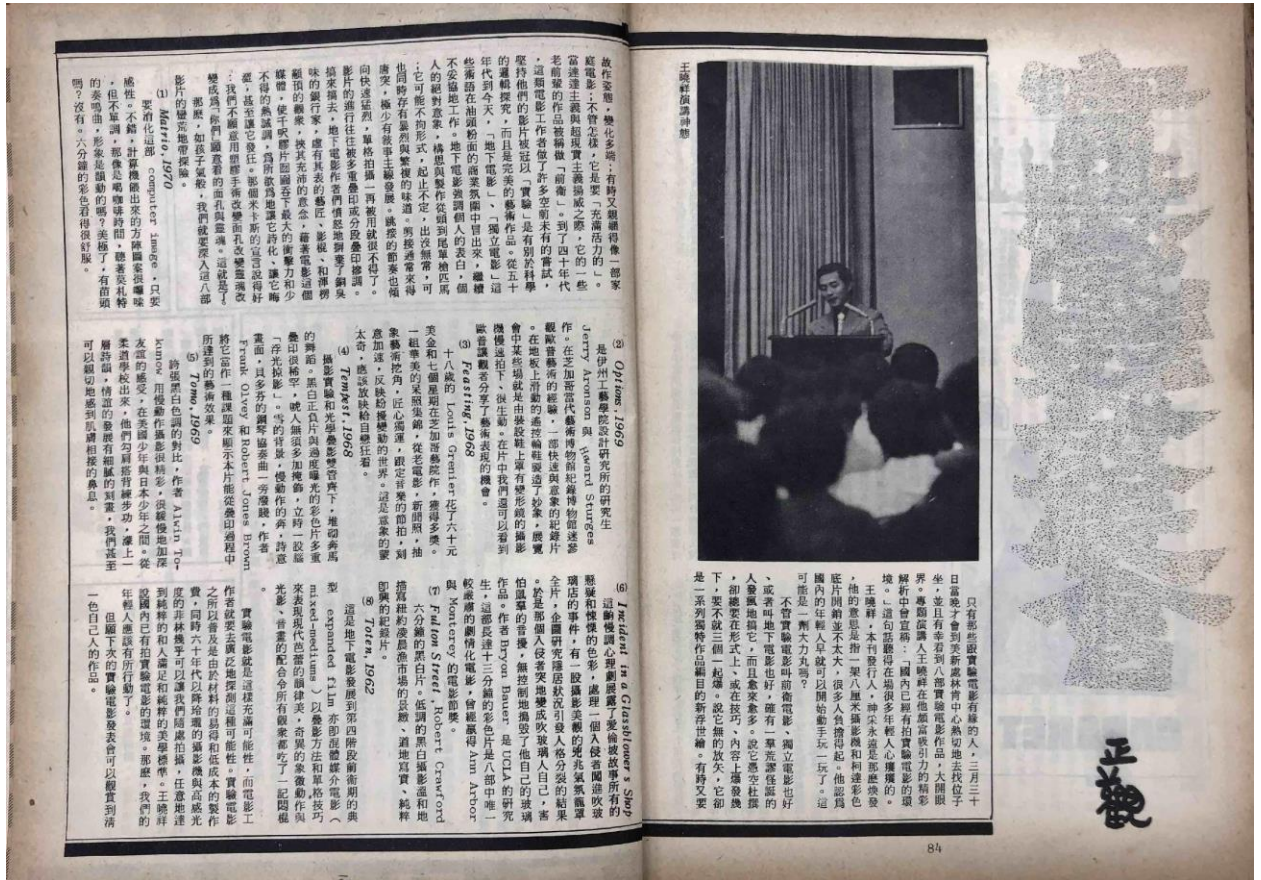


Figure 1: Xie's Report in Yingxiang (1973)
 [Zhengguan Xie, “Shiyan Dianying Fabiaohui (Experimental Film Screening),” Yingxiang, May 1, 1973]

The styles of these films were diverse. *Matrio* was an animation consisting of computer-generated images. *Feasting* was a collage of images from old movies and news photos. *Tempest* and *Toten* [Figure 2] were technically sophisticated; superimposition, single-frame, and mixes of black-and-white and color footage were some of the techniques noted by Xie. In contrast to these films, *Tomo* and *Fulton Street* were observational documentaries. I will say more about the only narrative fiction film in the screening, *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop*, later in this article. The inclusion of this psychodrama⁹ and other documentaries in this screening indicates that the USIS had a very different view of experimental film than film scholars at the time might have had in mind; that is, a mode of filmmaking that explores formal possibilities and downplays narrative.

If we follow the exhibition histories of the films in the 1973 screening, we can also learn something about the film programming activity at the United States Information Agency (USIA) and USIS posts in general. The 1973 screening of experimental and student films is not an outlier for cultural programming of USIS posts in the region.

Sociologist Han Sang Kim notes that during January and February 1973, USIS Korea held four screenings of “twenty-three underground avant-garde films made by American university students.”¹⁰ It’s unknown which films USIS Korea screened, but it’s possible that USIS Taipei got *Tempest*, *Totem*, *Incident*, and other experimental and student films after they had their run in South Korea.

The exhibition histories of these films might explain why US officials put works by students and accomplished artists together. Some of the films in the 1973 screening were grouped together as “underground cinema” in the United States in the late 1960s. For example, *Tomo* and *Tempest* were featured in the Genesis II program created by the distribution company Genesis Films Ltd. to promote works by young filmmakers at Cinematheque 16 in Los Angeles in November 1969.¹¹

The 1973 USIS Taipei screening also indicates that US diplomats would reuse films that appeared in programming curated by the agency for other purposes. For instance, at least one of the student films, *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop* [Figure 3], was part of “a special program of student films to tour mid-East countries.”¹² Because “Far East” referred to East Asia in diplomatic documents at the time, “Mid-East” should have referred to the Middle East. The fact that this film appeared in an East Asian country shows that different USIS posts would reuse films that first appeared in other programs.



Figure 2: *Totem* (1962), selected image
Director, Ed Emshwiller
[http://archive.org/details/totem_201702]



Figure 3: *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop* (1969), selected image
Director, Byron Bauer [<http://youtu.be/lZITFu16k4A>]

Judging from the eclectic styles of the films screened in Taipei, USIS didn't have a coherent aesthetic principle when curating this "experimental film" screening. Furthermore, it seems that the purpose was not to showcase the canon of American experimental film for overseas audiences. Although it is difficult to reconstruct the exact intention of the USIS officials for this screening, I will try to outline some of the institutional conditions that made an event like this possible. To push this line of inquiry further, I address the following questions: For what reasons might local USIS officials and their supervisor in Washington, DC, decide to include student and experimental films in their cultural programming? What were the intended effects? And how did local audiences receive and reuse these films? What effects did these films have in the local context?

Previous scholarship on USIA film activity primarily pays attention to George Stevens Jr.'s years (1962–1966) as the head of the motion picture unit. It analyzes films produced by the agency, and it underscores the creative and political relationships between the agency and the filmmakers. Historian Nicholas Cull shows that the agency under Kennedy's presidency was ideologically tolerant, meaning people with different ideologies could work together.¹³ Film scholar Jennifer Horne demonstrates how the USIA-produced films reflected or inflected US foreign diplomacy at the time.¹⁴

"To complement the research on USIA's production endeavors, I suggest that we view the agency as a curator...To counter the 'rebellious youth' images put out by Hollywood, USIA officials used student and experimental films to construct images of a creative American youth that were an alternative to the student protestors portrayed by Hollywood to their audiences overseas."

To complement the research on USIA's production endeavors, I suggest that we view the agency as a curator. In addition to producing nonfiction films to promote their images of America, the agency and its personnel at posts all over the world also showed films produced by unaffiliated filmmakers. Furthermore, in addition to studying USIA's intention and internal politics, one can also benefit from studying the often antagonistic relationships between USIA and Hollywood.¹⁵ I contend that adopting a relational perspective allows us to better understand the USIA's choice of curating student and experimental films in the late 1960s. To counter the "rebellious youth"¹⁶ images put out by Hollywood, USIA officials used student and experimental films to construct images of a creative American youth that were an alternative to the student protestors portrayed by Hollywood to their audiences overseas.

These Hollywood pictures were not only a problem for USIA but also an irritant for other governments that were obsessed with regulating what their people could watch on the big screen. In 1973 the Chinese Nationalist, Kuomintang (KMT), government in Taiwan banned all production and exhibition of films with violent or erotic content. The government saw western commercial films, their individualist ethos, and their depiction of violence and sexuality as the culprit that had been contaminating Taiwanese culture.¹⁷ Seen in this context, the 1973 exhibition of student and experimental films not only produced a positive image of US youth but perhaps can also be read as a strategy on USIS Taipei's part to distance the US government from Hollywood and other European film companies that had been producing troubling narratives and imagery.

To offer a more concrete picture of USIA's overseas cultural programming, the second half of this article turns the spotlight on how Taiwanese cinephiles and film critics repurposed and interpreted these films. The Taiwan case study will also demonstrate the uneven influences and diverse cultural Cold War strategies used by the US government in "free world" countries in East Asia.¹⁸

To conceptualize the curation, exhibition, and reuse of these American student and

experimental works within Taiwanese film culture, I rely on two different theories. One is the “national cinema as reception” approach outlined by film scholar Andrew Higson. He argues that to study national cinema and film culture, in addition to focusing on domestic film production, one should also examine what the local audiences watch and consume. Accordingly, we should incorporate foreign cultural texts into our discussion of national cinema and thereby avoid the problem of privileging films produced by national film industries and essentializing national cultures.¹⁹ In an updated version of his theory, Higson outlines three possible ways for local consumers to respond to cultural products that have moved across the borders and showed up on their screens. According to Higson, an audience can either denounce foreign cultural products as a symptom of imperialism, praise them as a liberating/democratizing force, or interpret them using “local idioms.”²⁰ Higson’s new categories emphasize how local audiences interpret foreign texts, but as I will show in the Taiwan case study, besides interpreting foreign texts, local audiences can also reuse them for different aesthetic, political, or social purposes.²¹

The other approach I rely on is “useful cinema,” proposed by Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, which can help us understand this phenomenon of use and reuse of films. Useful cinema conceptualizes films as “instruments in an ongoing struggle for aesthetic, social, and political capital.”²² It’s a part of what sociologist Tony Bennett, following Foucault’s concept of governmentality, calls “useful culture,” which contends that governments deploy cultural productions and products to do political work for them.²³ Useful cinema is different from its commercial sibling for Acland and Wasson because a “useful film” should have the “ability to transform unlikely spaces, convey ideas, convince individuals, and produce subjects in the service of public and private aims.”²⁴ Based on their insight that films have been used and reused for different purposes, I suggest that consumption of films is more than enjoying or interpreting film texts; the concept of consumption should also include how one repurposes these cultural products.

Following Acland and Wasson, I see USIA and USIS Taipei’s curation and exhibition of “experimental films” as an instance of useful cinema in the sense that the US diplomatic branch screened these films for the political purpose of delivering a positive image of the US to overseas audiences. If we follow Higson’s suggestion, on the other hand, these US student and experimental films should be seen as a part of Taiwan’s national cinema as well because they were watched by local audiences. Then again, these foreign-produced experimental films became useful cinema in the sense that Taiwanese audiences didn’t simply stop at interpreting them but also perceived them as useful for accomplishing local aesthetic and social goals. By tracing how the USIA started curating and exhibiting experimental and student works and how Taiwanese cinephiles and critics used these curated films after the 1973 screening, I will portray the process of how one country’s useful cinema becomes another’s film culture and useful cinema as well.

To chart the genealogy of USIA’s curation and exhibition of experimental films, I will focus on the relationship between USIA and private media producers in the United States. In a review of how the agency managed its relationship with the private media sector in the 1950s and early 1960s, I will show that the student and political movements in the late 1960s produced a unique situation for the agency that pushed it to use the “new media” at the time—experimental film—to solve this problem.

USIA in the Fifties: Managing a Corporatist Partnership

After World War II, the United States government collaborated with the private sector to pursue its political and economic goals. Conversely, US private companies relied on the powerful US state to pave the way for their businesses globally. This “corporatist partnership”²⁵ also occurs in the

film world. As film scholar Alice Lovejoy has shown, immediately after the war, Hollywood was able to export motion pictures to Europe through the infrastructure implemented by the US government.²⁶ Though Hollywood producers were eager to use the government's resources for their benefit, they were also worried that government agencies might become their potential competitors one day. Throughout their history, the United States government and private film companies have maintained an antagonistic yet cooperative relationship. In this section, I will show how the USIA managed its relationships with private film producers through exhibiting their films overseas. Furthermore, in the agency's self-representation of its exhibition strategies, we can also observe that its ideal audience was not yet the urban youth of the sixties but political leaders and peasants.

The idea of a "corporatist partnership" between the public and private sectors also informed the relationships between the USIA and the film industry. The founding document of the USIA, the Smith–Mundt Act,²⁷ delimited the relationship between the government agency and private sectors. In several sections, the law required the agency to prioritize services offered by private individuals or companies whenever possible. For instance, under Section 1005, titled "Utilization of Private Agencies," the act states, "In carrying out the provisions of this Act it shall be the duty of the Secretary [of State] to utilize, to the maximum extent practicable, the services and facilities of private agencies, including existing American press, publishing, radio, motion picture, and other agencies, through contractual arrangements or otherwise." As an appeasement of the commercial media,²⁸ this rigid doctrine of public–private cooperation can also be understood as the United States government's strategy to distinguish itself from the Soviet Union. By showing that in the US, the government can work fruitfully with private entrepreneurs, American diplomats could show the world why liberal capitalism was better than statist communism.

The problem with this legal framework is that it is only an ideal. In reality, friction between the two sectors has been a constant rather than an anomaly. Not long after the founding of USIA's motion picture division in 1953, documentary film producers challenged the idea that the government should be in the business of producing propaganda films. On May 19, 1954, *Variety* ran a report on the testimony of Eugene Castle,²⁹ a Republican film producer, before Congress against the USIA and its film production activity. According to the report, Castle criticized the agency for hiring people—director of the division Andrew Smith and consultant Cecil B. DeMille in particular—who didn't have any experience in producing documentary films. The result of this misguided decision, Castle claimed, was that the agency produced films that created more enemies than friends. He suggested that Hollywood could do a better job of selling the American ideal to the world, and it wouldn't hurt America's national interests a bit if the agency just scrapped the motion picture division altogether.

About a month later, the director of USIA, Theodore Streibert, defended the agency-produced propaganda films and claimed that Hollywood films were not enough for achieving the goals of the government. However, unlike his successor Frank Shakespeare in the late 1960s, Streibert didn't criticize Hollywood in public. He made sure that his comments wouldn't worsen the relationship between Hollywood and the agency by saying, "On the whole, Hollywood films have done this country a great deal good abroad."³⁰

The desire to placate private industry is also evident in a pamphlet on the overseas film program USIA published in 1959.³¹ The pamphlet is divided into three major sections: "Films that are winning friends abroad," "Making USIA motion pictures," and "How USIA movies are shown abroad." Through describing the types of film the agency has made, the production of selective titles, and the exhibition conditions in exotic places, the pamphlet attempts to present a comprehensive picture of the mission of the film unit. For the purpose of this article, it is worth pointing out that "youth" or "student" is not yet an explicit target audience in this text. The word "students" only appears twice, in

one paragraph alongside other social groups in a description of exhibition conditions in Libya. In contrast to this is the unmistakable primacy of private–public cooperation for the agency. The pamphlet devotes two sections to this topic. Within “Films that are winning friends abroad,” is a section titled “Increasing private industry film showings,” which concerns the role the USIA has played in helping to distribute “educational, scientific, and cultural films by American producers and distributors” overseas.³² In the second part of the pamphlet is a section simply titled “Private industry films,” which applauds private film companies for making the necessary effort to help the agency show their films abroad.

The pamphlet also portrays how the agency imagined the audiences for its film program. At the end of the first page, we read the following: “The program’s films give *foreign leaders* a clearer insight into United States policy. They open a new world of comprehension to *people who gather in villages and hamlets to see the films at mobile unit showings* (emphasis mine).”³³ It’s clear that countries without a big urban population that had not “modernized” were USIA’s target audiences. The films produced or exhibited by the agency served as audiovisual presentations on US policy to other leaders or were to enlighten villagers or peasants in rural areas. There was no middle ground in the USIA’s imagination of its ideal audience at this point.

To propagate and educate were the two goals of the USIA in the fifties. These dictated the films it showed to the world. According to the pamphlet, the USIA was showing newsreels, films representing the Science for Peace Program, films criticizing communism, films showing “America’s educational and cultural vitality,” and films documenting USIA exhibitions overseas. Though the pamphlet doesn’t go into detail about the style of these films, one can see that they had to adopt a realist mode of representation. In addition to newsreels, the exhibition films had to shoot events in a realistic manner; otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to fulfill their purpose, which was providing a filmed version of the exhibition to people all over the world.³⁴

The USIA was proud of the fact that these films were shown in theaters, on television,³⁵ and by mobile units. According to the agency, six thousand sound projectors and 350 mobile motion picture units were used all over the world. The pamphlet emphasizes the screenings of educational films about US scientific achievement in rural areas overseas. A representative screening for the agency happened in Pakistan. The event was possible because an “Agency riverboat” was able to bring films to “this water-bound region in Pakistan.” The films shown on that day included *Defensive Sky Power*, *To Clothe a Nation*, and *East Pakistan Fights Back*. The first one taught one audience member about the idea of “scientific power,” and the last one was about Pakistan fighting smallpox with help from the US government.

After reading “The Overseas Film Program,” one gets a sense that the films exhibited by the agency during the fifties were mostly about the foreign policy of the US and its scientific achievement. These films seemed to be what Jennifer Horne calls the “expository documentary.”³⁶ The films curated or commissioned by the agency in the sixties and seventies were stylistically different—either they had a stronger personal vision (such as films produced by George Stevens Jr.) or were not representational to begin with (for instance, experimental films).

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In short, even if there were private filmmakers who wanted the USIA to get out of the nonfiction filmmaking business in the fifties, the agency was still trying to maintain a good relationship with the industry, at least in public. The films the agency commissioned and curated were mostly in the expository mode. But things changed in the sixties, and USIA directors criticized Hollywood in a harsher tone. I would suggest that this changing relationship with Hollywood contributed to the USIA's changing producing, curating, and exhibiting strategies in the sixties and early seventies.

George Stevens Jr.'s Young America Series

The USIA started worrying about the image of the US conveyed by Hollywood films abroad in the early 1960s. For instance, this ambivalent feeling toward Hollywood was evident in a 1961 speech by Edward Murrow, the director of USIA at the time. Murrow said to his film industry audience, "I suggest that the image conveyed abroad [by Hollywood films] of our land is not always a healthy one, and self-restraint may nowadays be a good prescription."³⁷ Later that year, Murrow decided that he would only allow films that "[have] a positive contribution in support of U.S. policy objectives, or . . . reflect favorably on the United States" to be eligible for USIA's Informational Media Guaranty funds, which helped overseas distribution of commercial films.³⁸ Murrow was being careful not to denounce the film industry categorically. However, in comparison to his predecessor's response to private industry actions, Murrow was taking a more negative stance against Hollywood. It is also clear from his statement that the USIA had to find ways to counter not only Soviet propaganda but the image of the United States put out by Hollywood products as well.

In order to propagate a more palatable image of the US, the agency decided to produce its films in a new way. At the same time, it needed to do so without competing with or antagonizing the film industry. Murrow hired film producer George Stevens Jr., son of the established Hollywood director of *Shane* (1953), to be the new head of the motion picture unit. According to Cull, improving the quality of USIA production and strengthening the relationship between USIA and Hollywood were Stevens's two goals.³⁹

Getting a young producer from Hollywood was only a part of the plan for the USIA to revamp its operation. Around 1962 it escalated its efforts in youth outreach. This was largely due to Robert Kennedy's suggestion that the agency should have the youth as its target audience.⁴⁰ In the 20th Report to Congress (January–June 1963), the agency devoted a whole section, "Accent on Youth" to its newly established youth programs.⁴¹ Following the new strategy, Stevens initiated at least two ways to attract more young filmmakers to work for USIA: an internship program and grant competitions. Six months after he took the job as director, the motion picture unit started an internship program for young filmmakers. According to a 1962 *New York Times* article, the interns—four at the time of reporting—would spend a year with Stevens and learn more about the job in Washington first. Their duties would include "representing him in dealings with movie companies that make newsreels and documentaries for USIA." Then they would be "sent abroad to make movies for the agency."⁴² In an interview broadcasted in November 1962, Stevens elaborated on the interns' first-year responsibilities, which included "working actively as producers of the films . . . doing studies and analyzing films, information films particularly."⁴³ His goal was for these young movie makers to "contribute a new focus, a new imagination" to USIA films, which, according to Stevens, were to "show how democracy works, and how people can help themselves in developing nations."⁴⁴

The agency initiated another program targeting young filmmakers in the early 1960s, the Young America Series. Unlike the internship program, Young America was a competition where filmmakers could win grants to produce films for the agency. These fledgling filmmakers were hired to

make films representing “the life of young people in the United States.” For instance, a film made by Alvin Fiering for the series, *Sculptor* (1963), was about “a young sculptor and the significance of art in his life.”⁴⁵

Although USIA officials were troubled by the impacts Hollywood films might have on the US public image overseas, the agency didn’t adopt an antagonistic approach toward the film industry. The hiring of Stevens, a Hollywood insider, as head of the motion picture branch shows that the government was seeking a way to incorporate Hollywood’s sensibility instead of criticizing it. To attract the attention of the overseas youth population, USIA’s new target audience, Stevens tried to recruit young directors and even experimental filmmakers⁴⁶ to produce works for the agency.⁴⁷ However, the escalation of the Vietnam War and the radicalization of the student and antiwar movements at home posed new challenges for USIA officials. Hollywood films that embodied these new political-aesthetic sensibilities prompted the USIA to seek new ways to counter their influences overseas.

USIA and New Hollywood

The USIA had been puzzling over how to represent the student activism and countercultural movements since the late 1960s. Studying the development of youth counterculture in Mexico, historian Eric Zolov documents USIA’s efforts to reframe the US student movements in a positive light.⁴⁸ Zolov points out that the USIA officials were facing a contradictory task. They needed to contain the subversive images and words from the counterculture movements; however, in order to do so, they had to reprint these texts in their publications. As a result, USIA products had to include material that was critical of the US government. In addition, based on Zolov’s account, these officials seemed to be oblivious of the fact that US counterculture products had already been influential among Mexican youth. Once again, the enemy the USIA had to fight against was not only Soviet propaganda but homegrown artistic expression. Moreover, the USIA officials had no control over how these rebellious texts would be interpreted and used by young men and women.

Like the US diplomatic personnel in Mexico, USIA’s motion picture unit had to tackle the problem of media representation of the counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. First, the directors of the agency and the motion picture unit were concerned about the image of the US portrayed by New Hollywood films around this time. Cull notes that Frank Shakespeare, the director of the agency in the seventies, was troubled by the American commercial films he saw at Sorrento Film Festival in Italy in 1970.⁴⁹ According to *Variety*, the festival focused on American cinema—both Hollywood and independent films; it also dedicated one of its retrospectives to American underground cinema. Andy Warhol and Jonas Mekas were advisers for this retrospective.⁵⁰ The festival showed Robert Downey’s *Putney Swope* (1969), Columbia’s student rebellion film *Getting Straight* (1970), Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969), and Martin Scorsese’s *Who’s That Knocking at My Door* (1967), among others. Of the twenty films screened in the American cinema series, Shakespeare only approved of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and a documentary film, *Journey of Robert Kennedy*, made by David Wolper, who had a good working relationship with USIA.⁵¹ Shakespeare criticized other Hollywood films he saw at the festival as “social aberration” in his speech to the Sorrento audience.⁵²

Shakespeare was not alone in his anger toward Hollywood. Conservative filmmaker Bruce Herschensohn was the head of the motion picture unit of USIA from 1968 to 1972. In his book *The Gods of Antenna*, published in 1976, he criticized “the youth rebellion” films put out by Hollywood around this time, such as *Getting Straight* and *The Revolutionary* (1970), for distorting the reality of America. Worst of all, young audiences both domestic and foreign consumed these images gullibly. He lamented: “But those films didn’t portray a majority of the country’s youth. How could the foreign

audience or the young American audience know that?”⁵³

How to win back the hearts and minds of youth audiences overseas from “aberrant” New Hollywood movies was not only on Shakespeare’s and Herschensohn’s agendas but a concern for US diplomatic posts all over the world. To solve this problem, experimental cinema became one of the viable options for US bureaucrats. Two years before Shakespeare’s denouncement of Hollywood, an airgram about European student protests sent out by the Department of State to all posts in Europe listed “experimental film” along with “experimental theater” and “advanced pop-type music groups” as better tools to communicate with young audiences and reconnect with radicalized youth.⁵⁴

It’s not surprising that the USIA started to incorporate experimental films into its programming starting in the late 1960s. According to former USIA official and historian Richard T. Arndt, around 1969 or 1970, the agency put together one experimental film program and “three two-hour programs of art films.” In 1969 filmmaker Tom Palazzolo was hired by the USIA for a six-week tour of the Middle East. His mission was to give lectures and teach filmmaking techniques to local audiences.⁵⁵ The January–June 1971 Report to Congress also noted an experimental film screening in Austria hosted by the agency.⁵⁶

As I described earlier, the 1973 USIS Taipei “experimental film” screening not only included experimental films by accomplished filmmakers, such as *Totem*, but also narrative shorts by film students, such as *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop*. If experimental films were suitable for countering New Hollywood’s radical pictures and communicating better with restless students, how did student films become part of USIA’s curatorial strategy? And why did the USIA show student films alongside experimental works? One memorandum, dated February 25, 1970,⁵⁷ connected these two categories in an illuminating way. Alan Carter, the assistant director of Near East and South Asia for USIA, prepared the memorandum for Bruce Herschensohn. In the memo, Carter mentioned that an experimental film program⁵⁸ was a success in the area last year and had great appeal to “young intellectuals,” a category that was not present in the fifties brochure but was now the target audience. To fulfill the request from different USIS posts for a constant supply of art and experimental films, Carter suggested two projects. One was to commission the Museum of Modern Art in New York to curate experimental film programs for the agency. The other was to use the films shown at the National Student Film Festival. He added that if the films were not up to standards, American Film Institute might be another source to obtain experimental films.

For Carter student and experimental films were suitable because they could “be used both as a representative American art-form and an art-form that has particular appeal to young intellectuals.”⁵⁹ Aesthetically, experimental films were supposed to be a representation of the most sophisticated American art and hence an attraction to local elites and students. Additionally, compared with showing Hollywood movies, which was one of the more popular cultural programs curated by USIS posts all over the world, screening experimental and student films was much cheaper. Thus, US student and experimental films were useful to Carter for both economic and aesthetic reasons.

Through these programs, a different vision of American youth, sanctioned by the US government, emerged before the world. For instance, in 1971 a Youth and Film program in Israel was supposed to convey “the idea that many young Americans are engaged in creative pursuits and have a strong social conscience—and are not devoted entirely to growing long hair and smoking pot.”⁶⁰ Watching *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop*—a film shown at the 1973 USIS Taipei screening—with Herschensohn’s critique of New Hollywood, Carter’s proposal, and the idea of “creative young Americans” in mind, we can surmise that a film like this, which had good production values and didn’t criticize US society, could perform the propaganda work Herschensohn and Carter wanted. The fact that these experimental and student films could exist demonstrated that US youths were not all

hippies or profit-driven capitalists but dedicated, creative artists. In other words, these well-made films were a way to show the creativity of American youth without damaging the image of the US.

Carter's memorandum also points to some of the channels through which USIA acquired these films. At least three institutions were possible sources: the Museum of Modern Art, National Student Film Festival, and American Film Institute, whose founding director was former USIA motion picture unit director George Stevens Jr. Carter's suggestions indicate that USIA might have only engaged with these experimental or student films after they were finished, played in front of a domestic audience, and possibly received some awards in local or national film festivals. Based on Carter's plan, USIA would not fund the production of these projects directly but would distribute them or at least exhibit them in limited screenings overseas. This seems to be the case for some of the films shown at Taipei in 1973. For instance, Frank Olvey and Robert Brown's *Tempest* won awards at Ann Arbor Film Festival—dedicated to experimental film—and was distributed by the USIA and appeared on television overseas.⁶¹ According to Xie's report, *Incident in a Glass Blower's Shop* had won awards at the same festival and was selected for a USIA program that would tour Middle Eastern countries.⁶²

"If Stevens was hiring young talent to produce films with personal visions that were not compromised by commercial interests, Shakespeare and Herschensohn were particularly troubled by the 'rebellious youth' portrayed by recent Hollywood products. These subversive pictures prompted the USIA to use experimental and student films to counter the image of youth portrayed by Hollywood."

Although the US government had been using modern art to do diplomatic work since the fifties,⁶³ it was relatively late for it to begin treating film as one of the arts and include experimental and student films in its diplomatic activities overseas. One should consider this new production and curatorial practice in the context of the fluctuating relationship between Hollywood and USIA. If Stevens was hiring young talent to produce films with personal visions that were not compromised by commercial interests, Shakespeare and Herschensohn were particularly troubled by the "rebellious youth" portrayed by recent Hollywood products. These subversive pictures prompted the USIA to use experimental and student films to counter the image of youth portrayed by Hollywood.

The 1973 experimental film screening in Taiwan should be seen as the product of this tension between the US government and Hollywood. The US diplomats at the Taipei post might not have intended to use this particular screening to counter a specific Hollywood film that was showing in the city at the time. But it is at least certain that USIS Taipei could screen a student narrative film (*Incident at a Glass Blower's Shop*), documentary (*Tomo*), and experimental films (*Totem* and *Tempest*) because the USIA had been competing with Hollywood since the late 1960s to put out a more palatable image of the US overseas. Additionally, by showing these films, USIA could distance the United States from Hollywood and European film producers that had created censorship problems for the KMT government. As I will show in the next section, one could say that USIS Taipei achieved this goal with the 1973 screening. However, Taiwanese cinephiles and film critics used these films differently than the USIA might have intended. These experimental and student films became a crucial part of Taiwanese cinephiles' understanding and discussion of experimental cinema.

USIA and the Film Culture in Taiwan, 1973–1979

The seventies was a tough period for Taiwan. During this decade, the island started to lose its legitimacy as a representative of China in the international political realm. In October 1971, Taiwan was expelled from the UN. In 1972 US president Richard Nixon visited the People's Republic of China to seek to normalize the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Taiwanese people were shocked by this transition in the US's attitude toward communist China. The Taiwanese public, especially the intellectuals, experienced these events as a national crisis. They started to think about the identity question more urgently. A cultural movement emerged in this decade that urged people to study and write about Taiwan as their homeland (or *xiang tu* in Mandarin⁶⁴). The USIS experimental/student film screening occurred as the Taiwanese intelligentsia were starting to rethink the role of intellectuals and artists within the society in which they had grown up. Instead of planning to go back to mainland China, intellectuals were eagerly learning and writing more about Taiwanese history and culture.

At the same time, the local film industry was entering a tumultuous phase. The Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC)—the movie studio owned and operated by the KMT party-state—put out a series of “resist-Japanese” films to incite nationalist sentiment among moviegoers. However, the so-called “literary art” (*wenyi*) films, which mostly focused on love stories instead of struggles against the enemy of the nation, were also popular around this time.⁶⁵ From 1970 to 1975, the films submitted for censorship approval declined steadily.⁶⁶ In 1976 some film directors believed that domestic films could not attract college students or intellectuals to theaters due to their low quality.⁶⁷ Though annual movie attendance grew steadily from 1978 to 1981,⁶⁸ the overseas markets for Taiwanese films were shrinking in the late 1970s.⁶⁹ To tackle these issues, the government and the film industry hosted a series of conferences in 1977.⁷⁰ The solution developed by the government was to construct a national film library and have an annual experimental film festival to educate mass audiences about “good” cinema, encourage quality filmmaking, and scout up-and-coming talent for the industry. The first festival took place in 1978, and the library opened in the same year. The festival later became the Golden Harvest Awards, which is still going strong today.

In this section I will trace the afterlives of some of the films that appeared in the 1973 USIS screening in Taiwan within the context of this crisis in Taiwan's film industry. This is another instance where peripheral audiences appropriated and repurposed the hegemonic global power's cultural products creatively. When discussing UNESCO's film programs after the war, film scholar Zoë Druick speculates that its focus on fostering national film culture might have provided the institutional and ideological conditions to make the Third Cinema movement possible.⁷¹ She outlines a possible scenario where a global institution provides resources, perhaps unwittingly, for filmmakers based in Latin America to develop an alternative cinema to resist Hollywood. Here, the Taiwan case study offers a more concrete example demonstrating how local actors reuse cultural imports from a global power.

There are various routes through which films sponsored by a foreign government could enter a local film culture. When the Taiwanese government began to develop an experimental film festival in the late 1970s, these USIS-exhibited films turned out to be a surprisingly useful asset. The films screened at the US embassy became an important resource from which Taiwanese cinephiles and film critics could draw when they were conceptualizing experimental film. Some films were recirculated in educational screenings for experimental cinema. Some extended their lives textually and became part of a list of “authentic experimental films.” Finally, at least one film excited its viewers and prompted them to embark on writing more about the nature of experimental film. These writings and screenings indicate the agency of these Taiwanese critics and cinephiles and register concrete ways that non-Western audiences reuse and reappropriate US cultural products intended for diplomatic goals to their own ends. Their decisions to include certain films in and exclude others from the category of “experimental film” also demonstrate that the meaning of “experimental film” is historically contingent on and subject to social actors’ interpretation and reinterpretation.

To gauge the local responses to the 1973 USIS screening, I would like to start with the screening itself. Unfortunately, Xie’s report is the only document I could find. Xie starts with a brief account of the development of the historical avant-garde and American experimental film. Though he clearly knows his experimental film history, he doesn’t distinguish between experimental, underground, independent, and avant-garde. Instead, he emphasizes the commonalities among these types of films. For Xie, these films are all made by people who are “ridiculous” (*huang miu*) and “strange” (*guai dan*). They don’t make films for profit; that would be too rational for them. Instead, they are “maniacs” when they are making their films (*fa feng si de gao ta*). Xie emphasizes that these filmmakers were all trying to be innovative either in form, technique, or content. He also notices the variety of these films: some are pretentious and unconventional, and others are “intimate like a home movie.” Beneath the differences of these films is their essence: they have to be “vibrant (or energetic)” (*chong man huo li*).

According to Xie’s account, labels like “avant-garde” or “underground film” are just different tags people put on these “ridiculous and strange” filmmakers’ works. He ends his introduction with a quotation supposedly by Jonas Mekas: “That Mekas’s manifesto is one hundred percent correct: ‘we don’t want to go through plastic surgeries to change our faces and souls for your entertainment.’” It is clear from Xie’s introduction that what’s special about experimental film is it embodies a creative

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energy that cannot easily be tamed or controlled. Though he never mentions politics in his piece, it is still striking to learn that these words were written when martial law was in effect in Taiwan. And even more strangely, this rebellious spirit grew, at least temporarily, under the auspices of the United States.

In Xie's brief outline of the history of experimental cinema and his description of the films, it is evident that he was already familiar with experimental and avant-garde traditions. If the USIS experimental film screening didn't teach the Taiwanese audience anything new about experimental film or American avant-garde cinema (as Xie's knowledge of the avant-garde movement has testified), what did it accomplish? One accomplishment was probably on the affective level. The enthusiasm of the reporter from *Yingxiang* is hard to miss. Simply by associating the United States with exploratory and artistically adventurous films, this screening portrayed the hegemon as a place that valued and encouraged artistic experimentation and creativity. The screening showed an America that was not obsessed with consumerism; the United States was a place where true art could still happen. Perhaps accepting the US underground film culture as a model Taiwanese filmmakers should follow, Xie ends by urging the young filmmakers in Taiwan to take advantage of the relatively accessible 8mm camera and start expressing themselves through making experimental films.⁷²

The social life of these USIS-exhibited films doesn't end in 1973. Changes in the infrastructure of Taiwan's film culture provided a new circumstance for these films to be useful and for Taiwanese film critics and cinephiles to promote and theorize experimental films. In 1977 the Taiwanese government started planning to establish a national film library and an "experimental film festival" to help the national film industry. Though scholars and cinephiles applauded the government's friendly gesture toward supporting local filmmaking, the government's careless planning and execution of the festival appalled them. For instance, for the first film festival, government officials made an unexpected decision to divide experimental film into two subcategories: documentary and fiction. Criticizing the government's lackluster effort, one reader of the cinephile newsletter *Dianying Tongxun* admonished, "If the people who drafted the rules for the film competition had attended the screening of experimental films made by American young filmmakers at USIS on August 5, 1975, I would like to ask them to point out which films were fictional and which were documentary."⁷³ When thinking about how to define experimental film, a USIS film screening becomes a common reference point for Taiwanese cinephiles.

These USIA- and USIS-exhibited experimental and student films also circulated textually outside the US embassy after the screening was over. Four days before the first experimental film festival sponsored by the Taiwanese government revealed its winners on March 29, 1978, an article in *Dianying Tongxun* compiled a list of experimental films that had previously screened in Taiwan.[Figure 4]⁷⁴ The author of the list deliberately juxtaposed the USIS-exhibited experimental films, such as *Lapis* (1966)⁷⁵ and *Totem*, with works made by local artists in Taiwan. This compilation strategy, according to the author, was to highlight the "true experimental films" so that the government-sponsored film festival wouldn't award non-experimental works. Because the list itself is an illuminating transnationalist curation, it is worth reproducing in full here:⁷⁶ *Lapis*, *Duiwei* (對位, *Counterpoint*; 1975), *Totem*, *Nie* (孽, *Sin*; 1974), *Light*, *Jianzhu* (建築, *Architecture*; 1975), *Suan* (酸, *Sour*; 1975), *Cosmos*, *Daji zhi jian* (大寂之劍, *Sword of Silence*), and *Fengche* (風車, *Pinwheel*—the top prize winner of the first government-sponsored experimental film festival).

This list is transnational because it includes filmmakers from both the United States and Taiwan. The author of the list clearly did not intend to create a “national” experimental film canon; instead, he wanted a list that showcased all the true or authentic experimental films that had been screened to Taiwanese audiences. Furthermore, the list didn’t reproduce the experimental film canon. For instance, it did not include other, more well-regarded experimental or avant-garde films such as Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), to name the most obvious choice. Lastly, because the list didn’t include all the films that appeared in the 1973 USIS Taipei screening, most notably *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop* (in fact, only *Totem* was included here), this shows the elasticity of the term “experimental film.” The boundary of “experimental film” will shift depending on the circumstances and agendas of social actors. To write a history of experimental film, one needs to consider what that category means for a specific group of people in a particular time and space.

USIS-exhibited films also circulated physically after the 1973 screening. Some of them were used by the Republic of China Film Critics’ Association in its education and screening series for experimental film.⁷⁷ On November 18, 1978, approximately eight months after the first government-sponsored experimental film competition, the Film Critics’ Association hosted a screening of experimental films designed for college students at the new national film library. Only one film, *Omega* (*Oumique* in Mandarin⁷⁸), made by UCLA film student Donald Fox,⁷⁹ was screened. Wang Xiaoxiang, the publisher of *Yingxiang* and the presenter of the 1973 USIS Taipei screening, gave a talk at the screening. From all the information that I could gather, *Omega* was neither screened at the 1973 screening nor appeared on the Taiwanese cinephile–compiled list of experimental films mentioned earlier. However, it is worth noting that the association’s decision to use US student films to promote experimental cinema follows the pattern set out by the 1973 USIS Taipei screening. Almost a month later, on December 16, the association hosted another event to promote experimental film. Film critic Lu Zhizi was scheduled to give a talk titled “Experimental Film’s Methods of Collecting Material and Acting” to accompany the screening of four films, which were described as “American experimental film” in the newspaper. Because the news report only lists the films’ Chinese titles, I can only be certain about the identity of one film: *Tuteng* is its Chinese title, the conventional translation for “totem.” Hence, it is very likely that the film was Ed Emshwiller’s *Totem*, which was featured in the 1973 USIS screening. Another film from the 1973 screening, *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop*, appeared in an experimental film workshop hosted by the Republic of China Film Critics’ Association on February 10, 1979.⁸⁰ According to critic Zhu



Figure 4: Xu’s list of experimental films

[Rulin Xu, “Zai Taiwan Kan Shiyan Dianying (Watching Experimental Films in Taiwan),” *Dianying Tongxun*, March 25, 1978]

Choucang, who attended one of the screenings, this event was particularly popular. To accommodate the unexpectedly large turnout, the association decided to add another screening on the same day.⁸¹ These screenings indicate that the USIS-exhibited films were still circulating after their first screening in Taiwan. Moreover, when mainstream film critics wanted to promote experimental films, what was available were USIS-curated films or US student films.

These USIS-exhibited films also inspired people to think about experimental film in a more systematic way. Zhu wrote an article titled “Qualities of Experimental Film”⁸² in the magazine *Dianyinying Pinglun*, published by the Republic of China Film Critics’ Association, after the screening. After singling out *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop* as the strongest among the films shown, he traces the history of experimental film to the avant-garde movement in Europe in the 1920s. For Zhu, avant-garde cinema originated from the “modern theory of art.” The center of this movement, according to Zhu, was Paris; the avant-garde artists were influenced by Hans Richter’s theory of painting, surrealism, German expressionism, Hollywood comedies, Swedish “dream films,” and Russian montage theory. Zhu claims that “avant-garde cinema is the forebear of experimental film.” He categorizes seven qualities of experimental film: anti-narrative, fully utilizing film language, aiming for “visual music,” exploring real life, creating aesthetic “truth” and not realistic “truth,” insisting on an auteur’s “inner truth,” and symbolism. Zhu concludes with several suggestions to the government officials who organized the festival, such as that the government should shoulder the responsibility to regularly import great foreign films for cinephiles and filmmakers to watch and consider hosting an international festival to showcase experimental films by filmmakers in Taiwan.

Because Zhu analyzed *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop* in his piece, it is worth describing the film in some detail here. *Incident* was made in 1969 by Byron Bauer when he was studying at UCLA. The film follows the titular character’s encounter with a stranger who sneaks into his shop and destroys all his work. We only learn at the end of the film that the glassblower is the menacing stranger. The earliest screening information of this work I can find shows that the film was played at UCLA’s twelfth semiannual Evening of Student Films, which was held from May 2 to 4, 1969.⁸³ The film was also screened and reportedly won an award at the eighth Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1970.⁸⁴ The Taiwanese film critic Xie described the film as “Allan Poe-esque,”⁸⁵ and one American reporter at the 1969 screening praised the film as “one of the most technically accomplished films ever made at UCLA.”⁸⁶ As I mentioned before, the film was selected by the USIA to be featured in its special program to tour the Middle East. There is no description of USIA sponsorship in the article that reported the screening of this film at the UCLA student film festival. It is thus possible that USIA officials included *Incident* in their film packages after it played in front of a domestic audience.

What stands out in Zhu’s praise of *Incident in a Glass Blower’s Shop* is that he doesn’t situate the film within the tradition of American experimental film, New American Cinema, or the western avant-garde cinema tradition (though it’s evident from the latter part of the article that Zhu was at least familiar with the aesthetic concepts of avant-garde and aware of the key films of this tradition). Instead, he compares *Incident* with two other Hollywood films, Victor Fleming’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941) and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Zhu uses these two films to characterize the “Jekyll and Hyde” theme of *Incident*. In addition to using the two Hollywood films to set up the common motif, Zhu praises *Incident* over the two Hollywood pictures. To Zhu, although these three films concern the same theme, *Incident* is clearly superior to the others because it uses film techniques to convey the point in a more concise manner. Zhu praises the director for his ability to create suspenseful scenes as successfully as Hitchcock without the latter’s material resources. It is telling that the way Zhu speculates an audience would respond to the film is quite similar to how audiences would respond to a conventional narrative film. Zhu muses that when audiences are

watching *Incident* and gradually understanding the author's intention, they gain intellectual satisfaction and enjoy the pleasure of being surprised by the film. If "intellectual satisfaction" and "viewing pleasure" are what all films should accomplish for Zhu, what makes experimental film unique is that it can achieve these effects without high production values or a stellar cast.

Zhu's interpretation of *Incident in a Glass Blower's Shop* might not be sophisticated, and his understanding of experimental film might disappoint film historians and critics as simply wrong or misguided, but this article registers one framework through which a western category like experimental film could be used and interpreted by nonwestern critics. In Zhu's interpretation of *Incident in a Glass Blower's Shop*, experimental film is not anti-Hollywood. On the contrary, in Zhu's formulation, these two modes of filmmaking can be similar in the themes they explore, the techniques they use, and the aesthetics they create. Experimental film is worth pursuing or better than Hollywood pictures because it can achieve what the latter wants to accomplish; that is, to entertain and enlighten the audience in a concise and economical manner.⁸⁷ This idea that experimental film is not anticommercial might be popular among the fledgling filmmakers at the time. For instance, the grand prize winner of the first government-sponsored experimental film festival in 1978, Wang Chu-chin, quickly moved into commercial filmmaking and directed a fantasy film, *The Legend of the Six Dynasty*, as his narrative feature film debut the following year.

The Taiwan case illustrates the close connection between useful cinema and film culture. It presents a scenario where one country's art-film culture is another's useful cinema. This case also helps us to rethink Andrew Higson's framework of national cinema. Higson rightly points out that one should include people's consumption of films in a discussion of a national cinema or film culture. The reception and repurposing of the USIS-exhibited films in Taiwan remind us of the importance of the institution in creating conditions for reception. When the Taiwanese government was trying to establish an experimental film festival, the environment was ripe for generating more debate regarding the nature of experimental film. These USIS-exhibited experimental and student films then became a useful archive for people to experience, debate, and theorize on experimental film. Our case study also highlights the idea that reception doesn't only mean consuming cultural commodities, it can also mean reusing and repurposing them. In other words, useful cinema is implied in the idea of national cinema as reception. Taiwanese critics and cinephiles used these American films to promote experimental cinema, create aesthetic standards, and theorize about experimental film.

Conclusion

I have traced the genealogy and effects of one screening that happened almost fifty years ago in Taiwan. I argue that the USIA's relationship with Hollywood and other private media producers is a key influencing factor for the programming and exhibiting choices made by the USIA. To counter the youth image portrayed by Hollywood films in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the agency turned to experimental and student films (both fiction and nonfiction) to find an alternative to the rebellious youth popularized by films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). It is through this decision that American student films and experimental films became "useful cinema"—moving images that could function as tools to achieve political or diplomatic goals—for US diplomats. The Taiwan screening should be understood as a product of this genealogy. Through its eclectic selection of experimental, fiction, and nonfiction films, the screening was more about promoting an image of American creative youth to an overseas audience than demonstrating the cultural legacy or achievement of American cinema.

The 1973 USIS Taipei screening also provided cinephiles and critics in Taiwan with a resource for experimental film. The Taiwanese government's establishment of the experimental film festival and

a film library in the late 1970s initiated a moment where the answer to the question “What is experimental film?” had a larger institutional implication. The USIS-exhibited films provided inspiration and examples for cinephiles and critics to debate and teach experimental film. Through these discussions, the USIS-exhibited films extended their social lives both textually and physically after the initial screening. The responses to and strategies for reusing these American films varied, but one model embodied in Zhu’s article is that experimental film is not considered antithetical to commercial filmmaking; experimental film simply is the more effective and economical mode for entertaining and enlightening audiences.

In contrast to nearby countries’ experiences of experimental film, Taiwan’s case seems peculiar. Compared to Japan, Taiwanese cinephiles did not have the chance to see the canonical American experimental films projected on big screens and had to rely on American student films to sample the experimental and avant-garde. For instance, the USIS posts in Japan hosted a retrospective dedicated to American experimental film in 1971. The program was titled “The American Experimental Film—30 Years Retrospective.” According to the report by Alan Carter,⁸⁸ a public affairs officer in Tokyo at the time, works by Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, James Broughton, Stan VanDerBeek, and Bruce Baillie were shown to Japanese audiences.⁸⁹ The program was screened in six major cities: Sapporo, Tokyo, Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, and Fukuoka. How USIA and USIS Tokyo assembled such an impressive program is an interesting question; I would only stress the striking difference between the experiences of experimental film in Japan and Taiwan. To my knowledge, the USIS posts in Taiwan had never introduced this particular experimental film program. As a result, instead of getting a more or less canonical view of American experimental film like the Japanese audiences did, in addition to translated articles on avant-garde and experimental aesthetics,⁹⁰ Taiwanese cinephiles experienced experimental film mostly through works by US film students and young artists.⁹¹ This might be pushing the argument too far. But one is tempted to claim that during the seventies, it was films like Byron Bauer’s and not Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* that shaped young Taiwanese filmmakers’ experience of experimental film. These contrasting experiences of experimental cinema in Japan and Taiwan also remind us that simply because these two countries were (and still are) thoroughly penetrated by US political and cultural forces, one should not assume that they were influenced in a similar way or responded to these external factors in a homogeneous fashion.

Although the discourses on and the practice of making experimental film only occupied a small fraction of Taiwanese film culture in the seventies, by looking at USIA and local USIS posts’ exhibition and curatorial strategies of a specific genre of filmmaking, we get a more concrete sense of how a strand of local film culture—American experimental and student films, in this case—was conceptualized as useful (promoting US images overseas) by the US government, and how some of the films in that tradition were later deemed useful for appropriation and repurposing (to boost the local film industry) and incorporated into another local film culture.

About the Author

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¹ The 1973 screening is not the only “experimental film” screening hosted by the USIS in Taipei. From what I can gather, it hosted another one on August 5, 1975. Films shown at that screening might have included James Whitney’s

Lapis (1966). Unfortunately, I can't obtain the full list, nor can I find more reports on this event. For more about the 1975 screening, see Haoping Cen, "Zhongzhong Wuyun Longzhao Xia De Shiyan Dianying Zhan [Experimental Film Festival under Threat]," *Dianying Tongxun*, February 10, 1978.

² This was not the first time the United States set up a propaganda/information broadcasting agency in the Republic of China. The United States created the American Information Service (*meiguo xinwenchu* in Mandarin) in Chongqing in 1941 under the Office of War Information Overseas Branch, China Division (OWI). The first director was F. McCracken Fisher. The original intent for establishing an information branch in China was to create "a direct information pipeline between the US and China for the purpose of maintaining Chinese morale." After the war, OWI was dissolved. USIS (also *meiguo xinwenchu* in Mandarin) was one of the institutions that took over the mission of disseminating information overseas for Washington from the American Information Service. USIS belongs to the regular diplomatic channel. As Johnson puts it, "Where US consulates appeared, USIS branch offices followed." Johnson also notes that the USIS valued film as a crucial way to put out information to overseas audiences. According to US officials in 1947, one screening in China could attract an audience of two thousand to ten thousand, and "during periods of warm weather, average monthly attendances reached 90,000." (Matthew D. Johnson. "Propaganda and Sovereignty in Wartime China: Morale Operations and Psychological Warfare under the Office of War Information," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 2 [2011]: 303–44.)

³ "Meiguo Xinwenchu Fangying Dianying [USIS to Screen Films]," *Min Bao* (Taipei), March 13, 1946.

⁴ Zhengguan Xie, "Shiyan Dianying Fabiaohui [Experimental Film Screening]," *Yingxiang*, May 1, 1973.

⁵ According to the *Revised Mandarin Chinese Dictionary* compiled by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan, *shi yan* (實驗) has several connotations. It could mean "put something into practice" or "scientific experimentation." It may share similar meanings with "experiment" in English. It is interesting to note that the Mandarin Chinese dictionary also has an "experimental film" (*shi yan dian yin*) entry, which it defines as "A new American cinema movement, which believes that one should understand human life from new perspectives. It stresses the importance of personal expression. This movement attempts to use innovative cinematic techniques to resist commercial films put out by Hollywood." There is no entry for "experimental film" in Merriam-Webster's online dictionary. It might be argued that this understanding of experimental film was influenced by the Cold War cultural diplomacy put out by the US. When defining "avant-garde" (*qian wei*; 前衛), the *Revised Mandarin Chinese Dictionary* lists "avant-garde art" as one of its meanings, but it doesn't associate this term with the historical avant-garde movements that emerged in Europe and Russia in the early twentieth century. When the term *shi yan dian yin* appeared in the Chinese language is another interesting topic. It is possible that Taiwanese cinephiles might have borrowed it from the Japanese term for experimental film, *jikken eiga* (実験映画). However, more research is needed to answer this question. (*Revised Mandarin Chinese Dictionary*: <http://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cbdict/gsweb.cgi?ccd=7Ad1fF&o=e0&sec=sec1&index=1>).

⁶ The film can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/IzITFu16k4A>.

⁷ The film can be found here: https://archive.org/details/totem_201702.

⁸ The author of the report noted that the first three were student films, but *Tomo* was also a student production. *Incident* and *Tomo* were made by film students at UCLA. The former was made by Byron Bauer, and the latter by Alvin Tokunow. The Film & Television Archive at UCLA has 16mm copies of both films.

⁹ The 1975 Creative Film Society catalogue categorized *Incident in a Glass Blower's Shop* as "a contemporary example of the fictional psychodrama." This is also how Xie, the reporter for *Yingxiang*, described the film in his piece. He called it "a slow psychological drama" and "the only more serious fictional film in tonight's screening." See <https://www.alternativeprojections.com/films/incident-in-a-glass-blowers-shop/>, accessed August 5, 2020. For Xie's description of the film, see Xie, "Shiyan Dianying Fabiaohui."

¹⁰ Han Sang Kim, "Film Auteurism As a Cold War Governmentality: Alternative Knowledge and the Formation of Liberal Subjectivity," *Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2 (2017), 326.

¹¹ Richard Whitehall, "Genesis II: Good Collection of New Films," *Los Angeles Free Press*, November 7, 1969, 43. A *Los Angeles Times* reporter mentioned that all films in this program were made by students, but *Tempest* is not listed as a student film in the UCLA library's online catalog. See Kevin Thomas, "Student Movies on Display," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1969.

¹² Other titles in that program include *Nebula II* (Robert Frerk) and *A Little Fable* (Bob Pike, 1960). See their entries on the Alternative Projections Project website for more information: <https://www.alternativeprojections.com>.

¹³ Nicholas J. Cull, "Auteurs of Ideology: USIA Documentary Film Propaganda in the Kennedy Era As Seen in Bruce Herschensohn's *The Five Cities of June* (1963) and James Blue's *The March* (1964)," *Film History* 10, no. 3 (1998): 295–310.

¹⁴ Jennifer Horne, "Experiments in Propaganda: Reintroducing James Blue's Columbia Trilogy," *Moving Image* 9, no. 1 (2009): 183–200.

¹⁵ Kitamura explores a similar tension between the US occupation government in Japan and Hollywood in chapter 4 of his book. See Hiroshi Kitamura, *Screening Enlightenment: Hollywood and the Cultural Reconstruction of Defeated Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ For instance, Herschensohn singled out *Getting Straight* (1970), *The Revolutionary* (1970), *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), and other New Hollywood pictures as image problems that the USIA officials needed to address. Bruce Herschensohn, *The Gods of Antenna* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishers, 1976), 15.

¹⁷ "Jiaqiang Dianjian Qingjie Wenhua," *Lian He Bao* (Taipei), December 31, 1973.

¹⁸ I define Taiwan's national cinema or film culture as film practices (watching, making, regulating, distributing, exhibiting, writing about films) that occur within the territorial boundaries of the Republic of China, which includes Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu, and other small islands. Even though the ROC government recognized Hong Kong Mandarin films as part of its "national cinema" in 1956, I will not discuss Hong Kong film culture. For a brief history on Taiwanese cinema, see James Udden, "Taiwan," in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30, no. 4 (1989): 36–47. In a later revision of his theory, Higson argues that all nations are diasporic, and one should not overvalue national borders' ability to maintain the sameness of a nation-state. See Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁰ Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," 62.

²¹ In fact, in his 1989 essay, Higson emphasized the importance of analyzing how different types of audiences use foreign films. Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," 45.

²² Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, "Introduction: Utility and Cinema," in *Useful Cinema*, eds. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

²³ Tony Bennett, "Useful Culture," *Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (1992): 395–408.

²⁴ Acland and Wasson, "Introduction: Utility and Cinema," 2.

²⁵ Kitamura, *Screening Enlightenment*, 23.

²⁶ Alice Lovejoy, "'A Treacherous Tightrope': The Office of War Information, Psychological Warfare, and Film Distribution in Liberated Europe," in *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*, eds. Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson

(University of California Press, 2018).

²⁷ United States Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, H.R. 3342 Pub. L. No. 402 (January 27, 1948).

²⁸ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 40.

²⁹ Herman Lowe, "US Propaganda Films Inept, Castle Tells Senate; Says Info Agency Uses DeMille for Prestige," *Variety*, May 19, 1954.

³⁰ Lowe, "US Propaganda Films Inept."

³¹ USIA, "The Overseas Film Program" (Washington, DC: United States Information Agency, 1959).

³² Ibid. There was a tax incentive to encourage private film companies to work with the agency. As long as the films were reviewed and approved as educational in nature by the agency, the companies could export films "to 32 countries free of customs duties, special taxes, and other entry restrictions." USIA, "The Overseas Film Program."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. The pamphlet describes filming these events as "dramatizing": "By producing motion pictures of many of the Information Agency's major overseas presentations, the Motion Picture Service has dramatized major USIA themes to hundreds of thousands of persons who could not personally attend displays and artistic performances."

³⁵ Ibid. "More than 1,300 films used in the motion picture program have been released for overseas television viewing."

³⁶ Horne, "Experiments in Propaganda," 190.

³⁷ Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films: A Political History of US Government Motion Pictures* (New York: Hasting House, 1973), 182.

³⁸ Gregory M. Tomlin, *Murrow's Cold War: Public Diplomacy for the Kennedy Administration* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2016), 119.

³⁹ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 207.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 207.

⁴¹ USIA, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: United States Information Agency, 1963).

⁴² Murray Schumach, "USIA to Assist Young Directors: 'Internship' Plan to Prepare Students for Film Industry," *New York Times*, July 13, 1962.

⁴³ "An interview with George Stevens Jr.," *Film Comment* 1, no. 3 (1962).

⁴⁴ Schumach, "USIA to Assist Young Directors."

⁴⁵ USIA, Report to Congress, 29.

⁴⁶ For instance, painter and experimental filmmaker Ed Emshwiller made *Art Scene USA* (1966) and *Faces of America* (1965) for Stevens.

⁴⁷ The quality of many of these films has been evaluated and praised by scholars. For instance, see Cull, "Auteurs of Ideology"; Horne, "Experiments in Propaganda."

⁴⁸ Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.)

⁴⁹ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 302.

⁵⁰ "Valenti Accepts Sorrento Invite for US Pic Wk.," *Variety*, October 1, 1969.

⁵¹ For research on the relationship between David Wolper and the US government, see Joshua Glick, *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958–1977* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

⁵² Hank Werba, "USIA Chief Hits 'Aberration' Pics," *Variety*, October 7, 1970; Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 301–2.

⁵³ Herschensohn, *The Gods of Antenna*, 15.

⁵⁴ United States Department of State, Outgoing Circular Airgram CA-237 to all European Diplomatic and Consular Posts, January 14, 1968, declassified August 18, 1978.

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349432704/USDD?u=iuclassb&sid=USDD&xid=e9de1598&pg=6>.

⁵⁵ Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005). According to Palazzolo, Beirut was one of the cities he visited for the USIA trip. Based on a US news report, Palazzolo left the US in January 1969 for a six-week tour. Though I cannot find specific details about film programming for this tour, an audience response report might be useful in telling us who attended those screenings. The report is titled Film Festival Survey, February–May 1969. It was prepared by the Middle East Marketing Research Institute for the USIS regional research office. Although it doesn't mention Tom Palazzolo or any detail of the "film festival," I believe this report is about the film tour in which Palazzolo participated. First, the time period covered by the report matches well with Palazzolo's stay in Lebanon. Second, the report is asking for audience responses to an experimental film festival and workshop hosted by USIS Beirut. The report gathered responses from 182 participants, of which 23 participated in the film workshop and 159 participated in the general film program. Among the participants of the film workshop survey, eleven reported that they worked in film production professionally, and four declared themselves amateur filmmakers. As for the audiences of the general film program, six were government officials, forty-one were described as "professional," twenty-two were university professors or administrators, five were secondary school teachers, thirty-three were news reporters, nineteen were business managers or owners, two were labor leaders, six intellectual leaders, seventeen students, and eight housewives. For Palazzolo's own account of the trip, see <https://thechicagoambassador.wordpress.com/2016/02/25/tom-palazzolo-chicagos-chronicler-of-the-citys-foibles-and-its-oddballs/>, accessed September 25, 2020. For the news report on Palazzolo's trip, see "CHICAGO," *Boxoffice*, January 6, 1969. For the audience response research, see Film Festival Survey, Experimental Film Study, Lebanon, February–May 1969, IOP/RM.LEB.33, Research Data Collection Project Files, 1958–1976, RG 306, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

⁵⁶ USIA, Report to Congress.

⁵⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1917–1972*, Vol. VIII, Public Diplomacy, 1969–1972, ed. Kristin L. Ahlberg (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2018), Document 74.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1917-72PubDipv08/d74>, accessed September 21, 2019.

⁵⁸ These might be the experimental film workshops featuring Tom Palazzolo in Lebanon and other Middle Eastern locales.

⁵⁹ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1917-72PubDipv08/d74>, accessed July 30, 2020.

⁶⁰ USIA, Report to Congress, 20.

⁶¹ https://courses.washington.edu/eatreun/html/history/h_nw.html, accessed September 26, 2020.

⁶² Xie, "Shiyan Dianying Fabiaohui," 85.

⁶³ Victoria Phillips Geduld, "Dancing Diplomacy: Martha Graham and the Strange Commodity of Cold-War Cultural Exchange in Asia, 1955 and 1974," *Dance Chronicle* 33, no. 1 (2010), 44–81.

⁶⁴ *Xiang* roughly means "homeland," and *tu* means "earth" or "dirt." *Hsiang-t'u* literature is often rendered as "nativist literature" in English scholarship. For more on this movement, see A-Chin Hsiau, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2005). Though this is the most thorough account of this movement and Taiwanese cultural politics during this decade, Hsiau never talks about film although he does talk about television when discussing the national language debate (see chapter 5, "Crafting a National Language"). Sung-sheng Chang points out that the distinction between modern and nativist literature is not that clear cut. For instance, she persuasively demonstrates that one can see modernist aesthetics in supposedly nativist writers such as Hwang Chun-ming (黃春明). For more, see Sung-sheng Chang, *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁶⁵ James Wicks, *Transnational Representations: The State of Taiwan Film in the 1960s and 1970s* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁷ Longyan Ye, *Tujie Taiwan dianying shi, 1895–2017* [Pictorial History of Taiwan Cinema] (Taichung: Chen Xing, 2017), 200.

⁶⁸ James Udden, "Taiwan," in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 150.

⁶⁹ Udden, "Taiwan," 150.

⁷⁰ Ye, *Tujie Taiwan dianying shi*, 201.

⁷¹ Zoë Druick, "UNESCO, Film, and Education: Mediating Postwar Paradigms of Communication," in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁷² Xie, "Shiyan Dianying Fabiaohui," 85.

⁷³ Haoping Cen, "Zhongzhong Wuyun Longzhao Xia De Shiyan Dianying Zhan [Experimental Film Festival under Threat]," *Dianying Tongxun*, February 10, 1978. Unfortunately, I could not locate other information about this 1975 screening.

⁷⁴ Rulin Xu, "Zai Taiwan Kan Shiyan Dianying [Watching Experimental Films in Taiwan]," *Dianying Tongxun*, March 25, 1978.

⁷⁵ This one was not screened in 1973; it might have appeared in the 1975 screening.

⁷⁶ I reproduced the full list here and only translated Chinese titles into English. The films that only have English titles were likely made by US filmmakers, though the author didn't provide the names of the directors.

⁷⁷ The association was formed on August 24, 1964, in Taipei. The founding members were all accomplished writers and directors, including film critic and historian Huang Ren and director Bai Jingru. "Zhongguo Yingpingren Xiehui Jin Cheng Li [Republic of China's Film Critics' Association Founded Today]," *Lian He Bao*, August 24, 1964, 8.

⁷⁸ In the newspaper report from which I gathered this information, only the Chinese title of the film was given. The Chinese title "歐米茄" is a transliteration of the word "omega." This film was described only as an "American experimental film." ("Yingpingren Xiehui Fang Dianying Huanying Dazhuansheng Guanshang [Critics' Association to Show Films, College Students Are Welcome to Join]," *Zhong Guo Shi Bao*, November 17, 1978, 7.)

⁷⁹ <https://www.alternativeprojections.com/films/omega/>, accessed August 11, 2020). The film was also screened in the annual UCLA student film festival in 1970 along with another film by *Tomo's* director. R. E. Maxson. ("Film Students Jack Off to the Tune of 'Cambodia,'" *Los Angeles Free Press*, May 29, 1970.)

⁸⁰ "Yingpingren Xiehui Tuizhan Shiyan Dianying [Film Critics' Association Promotes Experimental Films]," *Zhong Guo Shi Bao* (Taipei), February 9, 1979.

⁸¹ Chouchang Zhu, "Shiyan Dianying de Tezhi [Qualities of Experimental Film]," *Dianying Pinglun*, June 1979.

⁸² Zhu's thinking on experimental film is interesting because it shows that film critics in Taiwan were clearly aware of the history of modern western art and the aesthetic concepts that emerged from this tradition; at the same time, it is an amalgamation of various conflicting elements (for instance, Zhu's experimental filmmaker should explore real life but not create "realistic truth"). Instead of seeing this as a sign of the "backwardness" of theoretical thinking about film in Taiwan in the seventies—that is, to judge writing like this based on more "advanced" thinking from the West—I suggest that we take articles like Zhu's seriously and unpack how they use various concepts and what goals they want to achieve. However, this project deserves its own essay, and I can merely hint at a starting point here.

⁸³ Kevin Thomas, "UCLA Student Films Slated this Weekend in Royce Hall," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1969.

⁸⁴ The pamphlet for that year's festival can be found at <https://www.aafilmfest.org/past-festivals> (accessed September 26, 2020).

⁸⁵ Xie, "Shiyan Dianying Fabiaohui."

⁸⁶ Thomas, "UCLA Student Films Slated this Weekend in Royce Hall."

⁸⁷ Zhu wrote: "觀眾於觀賞該片時，逐漸剝析作者的意念，也逐漸得到思想上的滿足，最後在精神上能產生『拍案叫絕』或『嘆為觀止』的愉快。實驗電影的魅力在此，沒有大製作、大卡司，卻能十分吸引人的理由在此，能觸發觀眾激賞力的理由也在此。" My translation: "When the audiences are watching this film, they will be satisfied intellectually by closely analyzing the author's intention, and the film will pleasantly surprise them at the end. This is why experimental film can attract people and ignite an audience's imagination without great production values or a stellar cast." (Zhu, "Shiyan Dianying de Tezhi," 89.)

⁸⁸ A brief account of Alan Carter's activity in Tokyo can be found in Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 303–04.

⁸⁹ Outgoing Message, Tokyo USIS to USIA, "The American Experimental Film," November 16, 1971, Box 423, P 1613, RG 59, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland. Bruce Baillie's and Stan VanDerBeek's films were already screened in Japan in the mid-1960s. In 1967 the Sogetsu Art Center hosted an Underground Film Festival which featured works by Jonas Mekas, Stan VanDerBeek, Bruce Baillie, and Jud Yalkut. The festival also screened works by Japanese directors Kanesaka Kenji and Obayashi Nobuhiko. Events like this explain why Alan Carter notes in his report that some Japanese audiences were not impressed by the USIA-curated program. For the poster of the Sogetsu event, see its website: <https://www.sogetsu.or.jp/e/about/artcenter/> (accessed August 18, 2020).

⁹⁰ For instance, cinephiles in Taiwan in the sixties could read translated writing by Maya Deren in publications like *Juchang*, a little magazine focusing on avant-garde, art, and underground cinema.

⁹¹ One reviewer kindly pointed out to me that "The first generation of South Korea's experimental cinema movement emerged during [the seventies] and had a close relationship with the German-Institut." Moreover, South Korean filmmakers, critics, and cinephiles could watch films by directors of the French and German New Wave at the French and German (Goethe Institut) cultural centers during this period. Although the Goethe Institut was established in 1962 in Taiwan, based on what I can gather from the newspapers and my correspondence with the head of the library at the Goethe Institut Taipei, it only started screening postwar German films after 1979. During the sixties, even though

there were several film screenings hosted by the German Institut, most of the films were silent classics like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) or F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924). The only postwar film screened at the Institut before 1979 was a film labeled as "Yun Shu" (*Transportation*) in Chinese in the newspaper. Based on the newspaper's description, it was a black-and-white war film made in 1961, which could be *Der Transport*, directed by Jürgen Roland and Herbert Viktor. The earliest film screening at the French Cultural center around this time that I can find in the Taiwan News Smart Web Database was a French film festival that took place in 1980, one year after the center was established in Taiwan. (The Republic of China ended its diplomatic relationship with France in 1964.) Although Taiwanese cinephiles could definitely glean expressionist and avant-garde aesthetics from these German silent classics, the experiences of avant-garde, art, or experimental cinema were different than what South Korean filmmakers and cinephiles could get from the French and German cultural centers in the seventies. Although Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were all heavily influenced by American and European film cultures, what the cinephiles and filmmakers in these countries could see on their screens varied. See "Deguo Wenhua Zhongxin Jin Fangying Yunshu [German Cultural Institute to Show Yunshu Today]," *Lian He Bao*, September 17, 1969, 5; "Benbao, Dianying Jijinhui Yu Faguo Wenhua Zhongxin Lianhe Zhuban Faguo Dianying Jie Xia Yue Siri Qi Juxing Qitian [French Film Festival co-hosted by this Newspaper, Taiwan Film Institute, and the French Cultural Institute]," *Min Sheng Bao*, October 1, 1980.

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