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# **JAPANESE CINEMA: TIME SPACE NATION**

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## ABSTRACT

This work utilizes a spatial theory approach to meditate on postwar Japanese society and cinema. It is not a history of Japanese postwar cinema, or a survey of notable directors and genres. Rather, the focus is specifically on film and its relation to the deeper tropes of Japanese society; in particular, on how the sense of nation is affirmed and/or challenged within a postwar period of remarkable change. Understanding such a structure greatly aids in analyzing the forms and meanings within the films. The question of National Cinema, then, is approached by exploring how the interaction of spatial-temporal elements affect both the social construction and filmic practices of the nation.

The first part of the dissertation features an extended analysis of Japanese society using a variety of historical, philosophical and theoretical sources, both Japanese and foreign. They provide a theoretical base and a social history that ground the critical readings of the selected films; all of which are well-known and widely available. Part two is a close textual analysis of five 1950s productions – from a range of films and genres – that are contrasted with three films from the late 1980s/early 1990s. The final chapter examines notions about National Cinema in light of the preceding film analysis.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage privilégie l'approche de la théorie spatiale pour une réflexion sur la société japonaise d'après-guerre et son cinéma. Elle ne constitue en rien une histoire du cinéma japonais d'après-guerre, ni un répertoire des grands cinéastes ou des divers genres cinématographiques. En fait, l'accent est placé principalement sur le film et son rapport avec les tropes les plus profondes de la société japonaise. Et plus particulièrement, sur comment l'identité d'une nation est attestée ou contestée durant une période d'après-guerre de grands bouleversements. Comprendre une telle structure est d'un grand secours pour l'analyse des formes et des significations contenues dans les films. La question du cinéma national peut ainsi être examinée en explorant les effets de l'interaction des éléments spatiaux (temporels), autant sur la construction sociale que sur les pratiques cinématographiques de la nation.

La première partie de cette dissertation propose une analyse approfondie de la société japonaise en s'appuyant sur plusieurs références historiques, philosophiques et théoriques, et ce, autant japonaises qu'étrangères. Ces sources présentent une base pour la théorie et une histoire sociale qui permettent la lecture critique des films choisis, par ailleurs tous connus et aisément disponibles. La deuxième partie se veut une analyse contrastive de contenu entre cinq productions des années 50 – des œuvres choisies dans un large éventail de films et de genres – et trois films de la fin des années 80 et du début des années 90. Enfin, le dernier chapitre examine la notion de cinéma national en continuité avec l'analyse de films qui le précède.

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## PREFACE

I first went to Japan in the summer of 1991 for a year and half to teach English in the Junior High Schools of Yatsushiro City in Kumamoto Prefecture. But my journey to Japan had begun -- though I didn't recognize it then -- much earlier. I had casually at first, but then with growing excitement, read novels by Yasunari Kawabata, Junichiro Tanizaki, Yukio Mishima and Kobo Abe. As an undergraduate, I had taken a course in Japanese history, seen a few films by Akira Kurosawa, Nagisa Oshima and Yasujiro Ozu and read a collection of poems by Bashō and other famous haiku poets. But the most important aspect of my fascination with Japanese culture was my interest in Zen Buddhism. Thus equipped, I entered Japan without a clue as to what modern day Japan or the Japanese were like.

This work is in some way the culmination of my shock. Though I was born in Guyana of Indian ancestry, grew up in Britain, Cyprus and Canada, attended graduate school in the States (my M.A. is in film criticism from the University of Iowa) and was fairly well-traveled in Europe, India and the Americas, Japan represented an inversion of many of the moral precepts and everyday mores I was used to. Immersion in rural Japan was both humbling and thrilling. The effect was not just psychologically and culturally disorienting but physiological. By the time I left, I had lost weight, become physically stronger and was bowing to people on the phone. More importantly, I developed an appreciation of just how culturally bound our lives are.

When I returned to Canada and was offered the opportunity to teach a class in National Cinema at Carleton University, I naturally chose Japan; despite never having previously seen half the films I showed the class. My education in Japanese cinema began by teaching it; thus it is probably not surprising that my focus is on the society as much as the films. Yet after many years teaching Japanese film courses (both at Carleton and at the American University in Cairo – this dissertation was written in Cairo), I remain convinced of the efficacy of my somewhat cultural, somewhat anthropological approach.

The more I delved into Japanese film and culture, the more I felt that the elemental structures of a society are the most fascinating aspect of any particular film. In the case of Japan, the spatial and temporal construction of the society -- implicit, seldom acknowledged -- reveal a nation able to accommodate change while still maintaining its own cultural (I want to say psychic) integrity. For a peripatetic, twice 'diaspored' being like myself, the sense of community, indeed an almost tribal attachment to place, remains fascinating and alien. I thus have a kind of intimate -- not to mention blind, puzzled, astonished -- distance from Japan, at once experiential, appreciative and critical, but also possessing the wide eyed, yet blinkered vision of an outsider. As such, this work stakes no claim to being authoritative or comprehensive; it is merely an attempt to voice a way of perceiving a society and a cinema I both love yet acknowledge as escaping my grasp, my line of sight.

All the films examined here are well known and readily available. Three in particular – *The Life of Oharu*, *Early Summer* and *Ikiru* – have been written about extensively. I have not, therefore, spent much time reviewing the various critiques of

these films as they are widely known within the film community and it would have been too bulky to deal with each and every argument. Instead, I have attempted to read them anew within the context of my own critical concerns. Criticisms of these films have not been entirely neglected; it's just that I preferred to refer to them when they are specifically related to a point that I am making. In the case of the other films, I have tried to include more research and critical texts to help build up a body of material on them.

The goal of this work is not to provide a history of Japanese postwar cinema, or a survey of notable directors and genres. Rather, the focus is specifically on film and its relation to the deep tropes of Japanese society; in particular, on how the sense of nation is affirmed and/or challenged within a postwar period of remarkable change: A subject, I feel, that has not been sufficiently addressed but that has great bearing on the forms and meaning within the films.

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Nothing could have been written without the support of my supervisor, Dr. Will Straw, and the discussions and critiques offered by Professor Chris Faulkner and Dr. Charles Levin on an earlier paper analyzing Paul Schrader's *Mishima*. Dr. Straw, in particular, has been supportive, patient and wise. I cannot fully express my gratitude. My students have also been very helpful in their own essays and comments in class. Their own particular insights and enthusiasm (much of what I know about *anime* comes from various students through the years) made for some great classes.

Most important however, has been my family. My children, Kayla and Joseph have let me use the computer and mess up the study. My wife Gwen has supported me

through the years it took to write this. It is her job in Cairo that allowed me the time and financial security to embark on this work. I cannot thank her enough.

Lastly, it is to the memory of my father, Alfred A. Ramlochand – a great teacher -  
- and numerous Japanese friends who shared their culture with me that I dedicate this work.

# JAPANESE CINEMA: TIME SPACE NATION

## INTRODUCTION: Postwar (Hypo)thesis

This work is a meditation on postwar Japanese society *and* cinema. At its intersection is the question of National Cinema; thus there is an attempt to view the films discussed as primarily the production of a place we call nation and, alternately, the nation as a cinematic production. Such a dual discourse, caught between issues of cinema and those of nation, poses a critical dilemma: How is one to arrive at a clear and unifying perception of National Cinema without collapsing the twin concepts into each other? How can the critic, as Homi Bhaba asserts, remain “alive to the *metaphoricity* of the peoples of the imagined communities... Their metaphoric movement requires a kind of ‘doubleness’ in writing; a temporality in representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centred causal logic.”<sup>1</sup>

Bearing Bhabha’s comment in mind, this work emphasizes the importance of social and historical factors in the study of Japanese cinema so that a greater understanding of the dynamics of film and culture can be perceived. Earlier scholarship in Japanese cinema tended to promote a more formalist perspective (in particular, David Bordwell’s examination of Yasujiro Ozu, published in 1980, argued that there is a pervasive American influence at the heart of Ozu’s poetics whereas Noël Burch’s well known text – *To A Distant Observer* – didactically attempted to distance the aesthetics of Japanese cinema from the West) or presented relatively straightforward scholarship

grounded in questions of authorship (Donald Richie's *Akira Kurosawa*; Audie Bock's *Japanese Film Directors*; Joan Mellen's *The Waves at Genji's Door*; Keiko McDonald's *Cinema East: A Critical Study of Major Japanese Films*; and the seminal work in English, Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie's *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* are notable examples). Tadao Sato's *Currents in Japanese Cinema* and Gregory Barrett's analysis of archetypal patterns in Japanese cinema – *Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Sociopolitical and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes and Heroines* -- were more clearly open to the kind of cultural (Barrett) and political (Sato) approach I am pursuing. Others, such as David Desser, have stressed the ideological import of the work of some key directors (I am thinking primarily of Nagisa Oshima), whereas Paul Schrader, in his short study, *On Transcendental Cinema* (1978), explored the religious dimensions of the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu, among others. Their work will reappear in my own cinematic critiques; though much of what I have to say about Japanese society (and thus about its cinema) plays – perhaps with the exception of Desser – a secondary role in their analyses.

More recent work has begun to emphasize the cultural and historical interplay -- principally, Stephen Prince's book length study Kurosawa, *The Warrior's Camera: The Life and Films of Akira Kurosawa* – that is a central concern here, but within the context of an auteurist tradition. An important text that inculcates the scholarly tradition that has characterized Japanese film studies but also points a way forward is *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, edited by Arthur Noletti, Jr. and David Desser. A

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<sup>1</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 141.



number of the names mentioned above are represented here, writing from the established approaches marked in the title. It is not until Darrell Davis' *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* however, that there is a full-length text devoted to some of the issues I hope to address. Davis' work focuses on famous wartime films (from 1938 to 1942) by well-known directors to explore how the films construct or reaffirm notions of national identity. The study is somewhat limited by his choice of films – they are all historical epics – and only in the final chapter is there an examination of three postwar films. This aside, Davis' concept of 'Monumental Style' treads some of the same terrain that I do; thus it is useful to briefly visit his definition: "The central feature of the monumental style" he argues, "is its appeal to the sacred, particularly its tendency to foreground an imaginary Japanese identity that eschews the corrupting influences of the West. The monumental style calls for repentance from the tainted forms and expressions of Western ideology in favor of an uplifting, otherworldly transcendence that comes from the purity of the imperial house, the lifeblood of all Japanese." Notions of national identity, therefore, are intertwined with the religious, political and anti-western sentiment. The ideological thrust, Davis continues, is woven into the fabric of the films, not as a simple propaganda message but in the very structural make up of the productions: "Films in the monumental style don't just preach the gospel of Japaneseness; they integrate kokutai – the body of the nation – into the technical design of the films to produce a work with a somatic, palpable flavor of Japan rather than a mere exhortation."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film*

What is fascinating to me here is that Davis' analysis is grounded in the history, politics and cultural milieu of the era; furthermore, these are not treated as separate domains, but as a heady mixture that begins to penetrate the ideological import of the films. It is not merely a question of the 'message' of the films but how these facts and ideas are expressed in the films' structural composition. My analysis is not as strictly tied to the cinema (indeed it is as much about the nation as it is about its cinema), is more loosely associative in its linkage of the films to the immediate socio-political environment (preferring to explicate the more elusive ground of Japanese sociology and philosophy) and is focused on a wider range of postwar films, but we do share the desire to demonstrate how the films, in the time periods we have chosen, replicate the 'somatic, palpable flavor of Japan.'

In this introduction, I will first provide a theoretical sketch of my position vis a vis Japanese society and cinema -- principally a review of spatial theory and its relation to Japanese social formations -- before proceeding to an account of the political history of the postwar years in Japan. The liberal reform of Japanese society begun by the Occupation (primarily American) forces but abandoned in the interests of establishing Japan as a bastion of capitalism against communist China, will initially set the stage. The political structure that developed in these years is still basically in place. From this base, I will explore the social landscape of postwar Japan, paying particular attention to the ideological importance of religion; transmuted, I would argue, into aesthetic practices and an all-encompassing nationalism. This section is divided into two chapters, roughly

corresponding to the two time periods in Japanese cinema and society I am examining, but are not strictly bound by them. A third chapter – “Space Over Time” – will conclude my reading of postwar Japanese society within the more abstract ideas espoused by spatial theory and twentieth Japanese philosophy.

Change is the great theme of modern Japan. The consequences of these historical and political changes are reflected in the vast literature seeking to define the nation. Called *nihonjinron* (discourses/theories about the Japanese), these works remain a potent discourse, a type of popular theory that attempts to articulate the ‘essence’ of being Japanese. Thus a cursory look at some of the influential texts within this cultural self-examination is pursued; especially since they informed – consciously and unconsciously – many of the notable films of the postwar cinema. (The exact time period of the ‘postwar’ is a matter for some discussion that will be addressed later).

What cosmological foundation underlies Japanese social structures – both real and discursive – is explored through an analysis of the three main religions: Shintoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Japanese religion is not practiced in the same way as in the West. Instead of scriptural and stern ethical precepts reinforced by a powerful and vocal religious establishment, Japanese religion is practiced primarily through traditional rituals and ceremonies as well as long established aesthetic ‘principles’ built around metaphysical ideas.<sup>3</sup> Thus some attention is paid to these traditional artistic notions,

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<sup>3</sup> This statement is only partially true. It is not true of Confucianism, which explicitly outlines the behavioral code of conduct for various levels of society; however, as a religion (with all the trappings of temples and priests), Confucianism is not a factor in Japanese society. As well, there is the well-established *Sokka Gakai* movement that is a notably conservative organization dedicated to upholding what it considers traditional Buddhist precepts in the political arena. As well, there are a number of ‘new religions’ which can

though more for what they reveal about taste and a particular aesthetic sensibility than as strict principles guiding all artistic activity.

It is also important, however, to consider how religio-philosophical ideas in Japan have been invigorated by its over century long encounter with the West. The effect has been the development of complex and competing philosophical positions that are neither Western nor traditionally Japanese. A particular strain of these philosophical investigations, primarily espoused by the Kyoto School, uses Western methodologies and concepts to articulate a philosophy that is grounded in Zen philosophy and meditative practices but not restricted by it. A crucial aspect of the work of Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani<sup>4</sup> and their followers is the analysis of being and nothingness, inspired by Heidegger and Nietzsche but still solidly based on Zen principles. Despite the universalist aspirations of the Kyoto School's philosophical movement, it still played into the nationalist ideals prevalent in Japan before, during and after what the Japanese call the 'Pacific War' (1930-45).

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be characterized as fundamentalist in their approach to religion in the everyday life of their adherents. However, as a general rule of thumb, politics and religion have been largely separated in public Japanese life before the establishment and since the dismantling of State Shinto at the end of the World War II. Thus, though the three primary religions have had periods of great ethical and political influence, in the postwar years their effect has been muted and subsumed under social praxis and aesthetic ideals.

<sup>4</sup> Kitaro Nishida (1870 – 1945) is considered Japan's first 'real' philosopher, in the Western sense of the word. His rationalist approach, spurred on by his reading of European philosophers, contrasts with his predecessors in that he was not explicitly speaking from an intuitive and religious perspective. As founder of the Kyoto School, Nishida's philosophy could be characterized loosely as phenomenological, but from a Zen perspective.

Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990) was Nishida's student and successor at the school. His seminal work, *Religion and Nothingness*, was only translated into English in the early 1980s, but since then it has had a profound effect on Asian and Comparative Religion studies. In the 1930s, Nishitani went to Germany to study with Heidegger before moving to Paris to continue his encounter with Western philosophy (it is reported that it is Nishitani who handed Sartre his first copy of Heidegger's *Being and Time*). Nishitani's career parallels Heidegger's in that he sought to address some of the same philosophical issues, but from an

I posit that the central process drawing the aesthetic, ethical, sociological, philosophical, political and historical aspects of the culture into a functioning whole -- through the exigencies of time (particularly the past century and a half of incredible change in the history of Japan) -- is the dynamics of spatial-temporal interaction in Japanese society. What is fundamental to the continuance of tradition, while paradoxically remaining open to change, is the interaction of space and time. I argue that in Japanese society -- at least at a utilitarian level -- time is often understood as change and as what is foreign, outside; while space is representative of what is truly Japanese, the unchanging spirit that is rooted in the soil, in the history of the Japanese 'tribe' and merely accommodates the new for whatever value or power it may give. The architecture of this relationship is such that these temporal incarnations are given a place within the society, but in this placing is a subtle undermining of their radical potential. They are subsumed, bordered; labeled as 'other' (it is worth noting that foreign ideas, words and objects are written in a separate alphabet -- *Katakana* -- to distinguish them from 'real' Japanese). The foreign is not only associated with time, but -- initially at least -- seen as something to be used and discarded so that it cannot ultimately un-structure the inner harmony, the sanctity of the nation space. For example, the Meiji reformers initially understood the modernization process in the 1860s as a means of resisting foreign power by learning their 'secrets.' This spatio-temporal configuration is central to the ability of the nation to move forward while still revolving within a prescribed orbit. It is at the root of an abiding cultural nationalism and stability in the structures of the state.

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Eastern perspective. As well, his (and Nishida's) links to the fascist elite ruling Japan, echoes Heidegger's

A detailed analysis of five well-known films from the 1950s will examine how the sense of 'nation' informs and is informed by them. Though this work stresses the cinema of the early postwar years (1950s), a later chapter will investigate the changed social circumstances of what is essentially (for us) contemporary Japan through a brief examination of three films from the mid-1980s to early 1990s; a period marked by great economic prosperity but also the death of Emperor Hirohito and thus the end of the Showa era (according to the Japanese calendar) and, most significantly, the end of the postwar period. The evocation of two distinct eras is so a temporal difference can be viewed against the spatial backdrop; or, equally, the spatial dynamic can be seen through the historical changes.

The cinematic side of this analysis interrogates the central hypothesis of time being enfolded in space through a close examination of the form and content of the films. To briefly give an example of how this portrait of Japanese society can relate to a film, it is noteworthy that in one of the masterpieces of the early 1950s, *Ikiru*, Akira Kurosawa is concerned to explore what it means to live in a modern society, how meaning and value can be attained in a world lacking in spiritual and ethical power. His answer in *Ikiru*, is to have his hero embark on a lonely, existential journey that leads to personal redemption through service to the community. However, what sets this film apart from similar Western narratives, is that the fear, uncertainty and final redemption of the protagonist ultimately gives way to a telling of the tale through the reactions of his fellow workers and friends. *Ikiru*, in its last act, celebrates Mr. Watanabe's (individualistic) heroic efforts

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relationship with the Nazis.

to accomplish something beneficial in his remaining days – actions that threatened to disrupt and even ‘revolutionize’ the static and callous behavior of the authorities – but shifts the focus to what the hero’s actions means to those around him. It is a crucial turn for what eventually matters is the group and the society at large.

At a cinematic level, the film’s last section – I argue that the film has five (or six) distinct sections marked off by their tone and cinematographic style – is told in a series of flashbacks motivated by various admirers and detractors of the hero; for his actions do not matter unless they are in the wider context of postwar Japan. The temporal play of the film, unlike *Rashomon* where it is used to question the notion of objective truth, is a way of positioning Mr. Watanabe. The group reclaims him. He has accomplished what he set out to do – drain a swamp and build in its place a playground for the local children – but the social structures remain, intact in their hierarchies and indifference. Kurosawa thus paints a portrait of Japan that is still awaiting real fundamental change, a society where the individual is still not free to resolve problems (both personal and public) in an atmosphere of openness and honesty – a wait that may never end.

I will return to *Ikiru* later, but even this brief exegesis demonstrates how the themes of this work can be reflected cinematically. Contained in this short analysis are notions of the group, of time, of the possibility of change, of individualism, of ethical behavior with its shades of Confucian sacrifice and a Buddhist-influenced notion of the ultimate suffering that permeates life: numerous facets of the social entity we know as Japan.

The extent to which the films from two widely disparate eras remain similar will also structurally replay the argument about time being sutured into space as a central trope of Japanese society; though this is by no means a settled question. This characterization of Japanese society does not merely set the stage for the films that emerge, but underscores the relationship of cinema to nation – metaphoric *and* metonymic, at once product and producer of the imagined nation; or, as Ed Soja, would have it, “Representations of Space and Spaces of Representation.”<sup>5</sup>

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The philosophical ground of this analysis is spatial theory, not only for what it can help reveal about Japanese society (and its cinema), but because Japan inversely supports and questions certain of its precepts concerning how space is articulated or articulates place. Because notions of time and history have been most recently re-conceptualized within (usually) Western theoretical discourse, it is beneficial to explore these issues before relating them to Japanese social praxis. Dick Hebdige, writing in *New Formations*, summarizes the importance of spatial theory to an understanding of power and history this way:

A growing skepticism concerning older explanatory models based in history has led to renewed interest in the relatively neglected, “under-theorized” dimension of space.... It has become less and less common in social and cultural theory for space to be represented as neutral, continuous, transparent or for critics to oppose “dead...fixed ... undialectical ... immobile” space against the “richness, fecundity, life, dialectics” of time, conceived as the privileged medium for the transmission of the “messages” of history. Instead spatial relations are seen to be no less complex and contradictory than historical processes, and space itself refigured as inhabited and heterogeneous, as a moving cluster of points of intersection for

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<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1996), p.164.



manifold axes of power which cannot be reduced to a unified plane or organized into a single narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Jody Berland, drawing on the work of fellow Canadian Harold Innis, who predates the more famous 'spatial theorists' (Henry Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Soja and Frederick Jameson), stresses the importance of defining:

a materially and ontologically based relationship between space and time which requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of space itself. Space is neither an empty frontier nor a backdrop for history, but the very subject/matter of historical change. Like these theorists, Innis conceives topographical space as produced space, and shows that the production of space and the production of social life are one process. Communications technologies are understood as practices that both respond to and mediate the social relations of a particular society, by setting the limits and boundaries within which both power and knowledge operate.<sup>7</sup>

This assertion of the importance of produced space is also part of a theoretical turn that posits the primacy of space over time. Soja sounds a warning here that this is merely "a strategic foregrounding of the weakest part of the ontological triad," the trialectic of sociality-historicity-spatiality; thus the title of his book, *Thirdspace*, which argues for a spatial critique that does not dismiss the importance of historicism (and thus the temporal critique), but includes time in a wider embrace of the possibilities of an epistemological understanding. Doreen Massey concludes her very useful paper in a collection entitled *Place and the Politics of Identity* by suggesting that "one way of thinking about all this is to say that the spatial is integral to the production of history, and thus to the possibility of politics, just as the temporal is to geography. Another way is to insist on the inseparability

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<sup>6</sup> Dick Hebdige, "Subjects in Space," *New Formations*, 11, 1990: vi-vii

<sup>7</sup> Jody Berland, "Space at the Margins: Colonial Spatiality and Critical Theory After Innis," *Topia*, No.1 Spring, 1997. P.58

of time and space, on their joint constitution through the interrelations between phenomena; on the necessity of thinking in terms of space-time.”<sup>8</sup>

By investigating how topographical space is given its ‘proper place’ through “systems and totalizing discourses,” Soja and Gregory, extrapolating from Foucault and de Certeau, conceptualize spatial theory as a means of understanding how the dynamic of space, knowledge and power can provide greater insight into the workings of historical change. Spatial theory sensitizes critical strategies to how power is a structured arrangement of knowledge, a spatial configuration that sets the parameters and dividing lines of a society, a means of exerting control.<sup>9</sup>

Lefebvre’s reading is more Marxist – though his work is not exclusively so – in his emphasis on political and economic exploitation as having a negative effect on temporal systems:

With the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space. It is recorded solely on measuring-instruments, on clocks, that are isolated and functionally specialized as this time itself. Lived time loses its form and its social interest – with the exception, that is, of time spent working. Economic space subordinates time to itself; political space expels it as threatening and dangerous (to power). The primacy of the economic and above all of the political implies the supremacy of space over time.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> (Massey, “Politics and Space Time” in Michael Keith and Steven Pile, eds. *Place and the Politics of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 159.

<sup>9</sup>Whereas much of the critique of spatializing processes comes out of postcolonial theory, in particular its emphasis on center/margin relationships and how the imperialist power sews the colonized space into the fabric of empire – there is little difference in conceptualizing the same dialectical procedure within a particular nation. Berland, again interpreting Innis, describes center/margin relations as being “tied then to social, technical, and ontological imbalances of time and space, whose symptoms include an acceleration of speed in technological and cultural change; a constant displacement of oral culture and of collective memory; and an increasing instrumentalisation of space as central to the practices of power.” *Ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. N. Donaldson-Smith, trans. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 21.

The other stimulating effect of spatial thinking is that it returns the critic to the materiality, indeed, the surface of the subject/matter. Rather than asserting an Enlightenment narrative onto historical and social processes, the door is opened to an understanding of how power is enforced and exhibited. It returns us to the spectacle of the present, its impressive infiltration of all walks of life. It is a postmodern trajectory away from the determinism of linear depth and progress toward an appreciation of the horizontal (or more precisely, topographical) nature of the world. It is not an abandonment of the becoming of a historicist attitude, but suggests that the ultimate outcome of constant becoming is a strange stasis. An acknowledgment that structures of hierarchy and power constantly negotiate whatever new environment arises (or presents itself) and adapt to maintain themselves in the face of change; a type of spatial eternal return. It is characterized by an increased sensitivity to the ideological landscape, to the hegemonic and homogenizing force of communicative and materialist 'technologies.'

What spatial theory can reveal is that the topographies of power – especially in the national context -- foregrounds visibility and present-ness, it masks individual memory, replacing it with collective amnesia. Yet this is no mere propaganda machine, but a deeply felt cosmological enchantment. Power and knowledge are not an occupying army but a spatial arrangement that helps (us) sort through the chaos of life to assemble some order, some structure of knowing, some means of traversing the uncertainties of fate. If they are ordered to always seemingly benefit an elite, to always maintain the *status quo*, it is not, however, their natural right.

Resistance is not futile. It comes, perhaps, in the heterotopic fantasy of Foucault, in the possibility of spaces of resistance. But this is not a resistance that posits a radical break with the past, a futuristic hope of redemption, of freedom and harmony for all. Rather it is an acceptance of contingency, of the desire for heterogeneity in the face of the overwhelming urge of temporal discourse to issue manifestos that would stand for all humanity and all time. Spatial theory then has its own hope, its own need for tolerance that would preserve the “astonishment” of culture(s).

Japan reflects many aspects of the spatial critique and its political repercussions. In many respects it would seem to be an embodiment of the spatial understanding. Soja, in particular, understands spatial theory as undoing the damage of “Time and History [that] absconded with the dynamics of human and societal development – agency, evolution, revolution, change, modernization, biography, the entire ontological storyline of the “becoming” of being and sociality.”<sup>11</sup> Japan, because of its long isolation and late entry into the ‘discursive realities’ of the modern world, would seem an apt test case for a spatial reading antithetical to the determinism, the ‘dead weight’ of a primarily nineteenth temporal discourse. Whether this is possible, or to what extent the shoe fits, is one of the central theoretical objectives of this work. For how Japan has managed to re-form itself from an odd example of a late-medieval society (1850s) into an industrialized, fascist and imperialist nation in the 1930s, then into a modern ‘democratic’ economic superpower, begs the question of how spatio-temporal relations combined to maintain a sense of self –

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<sup>11</sup>*Thirdspace*, p. 168

as a culture, as a nation, as a society – in the face of incredible historical change.<sup>12</sup> It is a re-formation that brooks no comparison, because, except for the seven years of Occupation after World War II, Japan has remained an independent nation, at once westernized, but deeply distinct as an Oriental society. Whereas spatial theory breaks with past (so to speak) temporally-driven perspectives and though Lefebvre, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Foucault, Harold Innis et al understand spatial relations principally, if not exclusively, as the material production of space, Japan may be exceptional in that there is no complete break with the past, but a spatial configuration founded on certain religio-philosophical foundations that accommodates the past and the present; that Japan is both ‘traditional and postmodern,’ to use Fu and Heine’s title for a collection of writings on contemporary Japan.<sup>13</sup>

Inscribed upon its cinema is the braille of this social-geographical and historical struggle. Indeed, it takes a certain blindness to perhaps get a feel for a culture so exotic and ‘othered,’ but pervasive and near at hand; as so many are in this new information age. But also at issue here is the inscription or embedded nature of cinema to culture. The films are ‘Made in Japan,’ and no matter what plasticity, what seemingly ‘universal’ quality they possess, they still are products of the time and place of their production. In

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<sup>12</sup> Massey, in her critique of Laclau’s *New reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, characterizes his position as not only harbouring illusions of the ‘stasis’ of space versus time, but that change – when it finally does arrive – can only come to the spatial and social arrangement internally. Thus it may be seen as a build-up within the spatial structures, a type of critical mass that finally topples over or dissolves the foundations of a spatially atrophied society. (Massey, 1993: 143). Japan’s recent history brings this issue of change and spatiality to the fore in that change has come to Japan because of external pressures (to put it mildly) and its response, has been the reorganization of the social relations (while maintaining the dynamic of spatial relations, of the necessity of spatial divisions) to re-establish itself within the new temporal condition.

this, furthermore, is evoked the anxieties of a nation undergoing its own existential struggle, its appearance and disappearance in a homogenizing international space, a globalization process that Japan is a willing participant in; not the least of which is to its economic benefit.

I cannot pretend that my reading of Japan and Japanese cinema is comprehensive or can refute any and all contrary arguments; that is not the purpose. Rather, there is an attempt here to give greater value to an understanding specific to the ideological make-up of the nation over strictly filmic theories; or at least to redress the balance. The result, I believe, is a necessarily selective, though wide-ranging reading of Japanese cinema that is poured through a spatially influenced theoretical sieve.

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<sup>13</sup> Fu, Charles Wei-hsun and Steven Heine, eds. *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

## CHAPTER ONE:

### Postwar *Nihonjinron*

December 1992: Standing on the balcony of the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, one has a clear view of the surrounding valley. Known as the 'hypo-centre,' this urban expanse was directly under the bomb bursting in air (so to speak). Inside the museum, there are photographs of this area in the aftermath of the bomb: a completely leveled, entangled field of concrete rubble, faint traces of smoke in the sepia panorama. Other artifacts include melted Daliesque clocks and watches, their hands frozen in time.

These belong with the photographs. For now, in the early winter light, the city is lush with all manner of high rises, the post-war industry of offices and love hotels. The space has been replenished, re-born to the modern world. In fact, Nagasaki was historically the Japanese gateway to the modern, the outside, the other. Its harbour contains the tiny island of Dejima, which was the only point of contact (once a year) with Chinese and Dutch traders during the long Tokugawa isolation (early 1600s to the 1850s). After Japan was 'reopened' in the 1850s by Commodore Perry (of the American navy), Nagasaki became important as a naval facility for Japan's imperialist forays into Korea and China. As well, it became the center of the resurgence of Christianity in Japan; thus, ironically, it was above the largest Catholic cathedral in Asia that "Little Man" exploded its deadly white light. This explosion, which marked the end of World War II, was also the beginning of the new Japan; the non-militaristic, economic superpower we know today.

Many commentators mark the beginning of the 'New Japan' as August 15, 1945 because of the Emperor's radio broadcast announcing the surrender. In a sense, this event – which Japanese all over the nation remember with great clarity – was its own bombshell that officially closed off the preceding years and snapped people awake from the long night of ultranationalism and war. In an analysis of the various 'postwars' – historical myths about the 'New Japan' and its relation to the past – Carol Gluck notes the importance of a type of wilful forgetting that characterized this era of reconstruction, both at a psychological and historical level. It was (and is) primarily a mythic construction necessary for the remaking of the nation.

Japan's mythishistic postwar began by being as if severed from the past. It was also of course connected to it, not only because of the lived continuities, however repressed, but also because the mythic insistence on disconnection kept bringing the past relentlessly to mind. Japan's second postwar emerged from this imaginary of connection/disconnection. The postwar as *the inversion of the prewar* (*senzen*, also a noun) signified that the postwar present would be remade as an anti-past. All that was fascist, imperialist, militarist, oligopolist, landlord-exploitative – the entire "emperor system" (*tennôsei*) – in short, all that had brought Japan to war was declared the negative model for the postwar reforms. This conception of an anti-past constituted the original memory, the first postwar redaction of the history of imperialism and war. It produced what I call the "heroic narrative," with villains and victims clearly defined and a plotline so simple and strong that it was almost cinematic.<sup>14</sup>

Gluck also argues that the postwar period may not have ended until the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989; if, indeed, it has. The reason for this ambivalence is that though the material and social conditions have radically changed from the immediate postwar years, many of the same existential anxieties played out on a national scale return



again and again to haunt the Japanese imagination. The ghosts of the war have not been laid to rest. The incredible leap forward that marked Japanese history from the Meiji Restoration of the mid-nineteenth century onward and climaxed during the years of war throughout the Pacific has not been worked through. The new Japan is stillborn. The Japan to come still awaits delivery and thus the obsessions with defining the Japanese self

Nagasaki, with its shattered, frozen timepieces may give a clear moment in time for the death of the old and the birth of contemporary Japan, but it remains important to consider – as many critics have – how this decimated space was replenished. For out of this conjunction of time and space is the road to an understanding of how Japan reconstituted itself as a nation.

The defeat and subsequent occupation by predominantly American forces led to a massive re-organization of Japanese society. A shortlist would include the renunciation by the Emperor of his divinity, the downgrading of Shintoism as the 'state religion,' the granting to women the right to vote, the re-distribution of land to small farmers, the (initial, at least) break-up of the *Zaibatsus* (monopoly-like, integrated companies), and the legalizing of workers' unions.<sup>15</sup> Many of these reforms occurred in the first few years

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<sup>14</sup> Carol Gluck, "The "End" of the Postwar: Japan at the Turn of the Millennium," *Public Culture* Vol 10, No. 1 (Fall 1997), pps. 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Mikiso Hane reports that the "new constitution [written by SCAP and that came into effect in May, 1947] changed the identity and role of the Emperor from that of an absolute monarch to "the symbol of the State and unity of the people." The cabinet was made directly responsible to the Diet, which was made "the highest organ of state power." The members of the two houses were to be elected directly by the people."

Based on the American Bill of Rights, the Japanese constitution went further by enshrining "the right to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living. In all spheres of life, the State shall use its endeavors for the promotion and extension of social welfare and security, and of public health." Basically, asserts Hane, along with the right to education, equality of the sexes and union organization, the "constitution provides for full legal protection against arbitrary arrest and punishment. In other words, the

after the war, but were, later, in the interest of the Cold War, either repealed or toned down. Japan is a land of euphemisms and thus this was called the 'reverse course,' the undoing of the more democratic and progressive policies, the imposition of limits to the freedoms promised by the ruling SCAP forces. It would lead to a permanent schism in Japanese politics between the socialist, union-oriented wing that sees itself as standard bearers of democracy and economic justice versus the entrenched Liberal Democrats who also perceived themselves as democratic but traditionalists, supportive of American foreign policy (especially as a bulwark against Communism) and capitalism.

Perhaps what best indicates the connection/disconnection between the past (primarily the nationalist and imperialist strain) and the postwar years was the ascendancy to the premiership of Nobusuke Kishi, whom Patrick Smith describes as "a war criminal and a thug."<sup>16</sup> Though an "A" list war criminal (Kishi served as the second-ranked civilian in the Japanese administration of Manchuria in the 1930s, then in Hideki Tojo's cabinet during the war), Kishi was released from prison in 1948, without explanation, and began his climb to the premiership in 1957 "backed by postwar Japan's least-savory collection of unreconstructed fascists, Sugamao alumni, and *yakuza* crime bosses. Kishi brought many of his cronies into national politics with him. His administration, indeed, marked the consolidation of the prewar nationalists' future in Japanese politics."<sup>17</sup> He

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rule-of-law had finally become a reality on Japan." Mikiso Hane, *Modern Japan A Historical Survey* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), pages 350-51.

The other notable constitutional provision was the "no-war" clause that essentially banned the formation of any type of armed forces. It would take a careful interpretation of this article to allow the creation of the Japan Self-Defence Force; something the Americans themselves supported.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Smith, *Japan A Reinterpretation* (Toronto: Harper Collins 1997) p. 26

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27.

was, Smith reports, not only instrumental in renewing the American-Japanese security treaty,<sup>18</sup> but also on the CIA payroll.

The fact that Kishi was often working in the interests of the United States rather than Japan raises another issue about Japanese politics, even beyond U.S. meddling in Japanese politics in the decade following the end of the Occupation in 1952: the place of power or how political power is structured in the society. Instead of a transparent system where those in power could be seen and held accountable for their actions – the ostensible structure of parliamentary democracy in Japan – Japanese economic and political power has remained displaced, always hidden from view. To such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to determine who should be held responsible for actions or policies guiding the nation: the government; the bosses in the Liberal Democratic Party that has ruled Japan since 1955 with only a brief interruption; the civil service bureaucracy or certain powerful departments within it; the *Yakuza* (the mafia-like criminal organizations that are known to finance many Members of Parliament; multinational corporations and the ‘networks’ most companies participate in to bring stability and increased earnings to themselves; the list goes on. The political system has been characterized by corruption and cronyism by many a Japanese and foreign commentator.<sup>19</sup> Structurally, this system has been described

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<sup>18</sup> Abbreviated in Japan as AMPO, the renewal of this treaty in 1960, against incredible popular opposition was Kishi’s most significant contribution to the Cold War political maneuvers of his American masters. To pass the Bill through the Diet (parliament), Kishi had the police carry opposition members out of the legislative chamber.

<sup>19</sup> Edwin Reingold, an American correspondent for Time Magazine, was based in Japan for twenty years. In his 1992 book on his experiences, he writes that:

Political bribery scandals have directly or indirectly touched virtually every important political figure in postwar Japan. These scandals are the delight of the press, which is perpetually outraged by the corruption. The public, swerving from outrage to bemusement and indifference, very often returns the tainted to office. All Japanese politicians face the same nagging problem in the quest

as 'a-centric' (or in later discussions about postmodernity and Japan, as 'de-centric'), as lacking an identifiable center. The one possible center, and this is reflected in the urban 'design' of Tokyo whose streets circle the 'sacred space' of his grounds, is the Emperor. He is, however, merely a figurehead, a symbol lacking any concrete power or even constitutional role, the very fact of his presence (or absence in that he is powerless and seldom seen) gives credibility to the argument that the real business of running the country revolves around an empty center and that this hollow center has allowed the shadowy figures of the past to re-assert themselves on the political and economic scene.

Despite the counter-reforms that scaled back of many of the democratic and progressive policies (in particular, through union-busting in the late 1940s and the witch hunts for suspected communist radicals) and the reinstatement of many corporate and political figures from the wartime years, there still remained numerous extensive and minor changes in the political establishment that profoundly altered the political and social landscape. Generally speaking, it appears that the economic and political arenas suffered the 'reverse course' so as to co-opt the capitalist and nationalist elements to a pro-Western bias, but the new social policies (voting rights, some land reform and the re-secularization of the society) were allowed to stand.

More significant than all these changes, however, was that for the first time in its long history Japan was essentially ruled by an outside power. The authorities -- both

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for power: the need for money, and lots of it -- in cash. So despite scandal after scandal, the same political figures surface again and again with succeeding governments, as the spoils of office are passed around.

Japanese and American -- were so afraid of the psychic disturbance the occupation would cause that in Japan it was referred to as a 'stationing' (thus a temporary positioning),<sup>20</sup> in hopes of dulling the effect of the entrance of the 'Other' into the 'sacred' space of the nation. The fact that this power had only recently been portrayed as barbaric and imperialist only underlined the shock of the defeat and subsequent occupation; and would set off profound reverberations throughout the society that in many ways have not abated.

It led to an on-going reevaluation of the Japanese by the Japanese (and by outside observers) of what it means to be Japanese. Commonly known as *Nihonjinron* (literally 'discourse about the Japanese,' but also referred to as *Nihonron* - theory about Japan), it is all about nation: what constitutes it, what is distinctive about it, what it is its legitimate legacy, what are its goals, how can the nation change and still maintain its sense of self.

Winston Davis in *Japanese Religion and Society* summarizes it thus:

The "theory of Japanese culture" is a study of the uniqueness of Japanese consciousness as expressed in literature, language religion and the arts. The "soft-shelled" side of the theory, these studies roughly what the Marxist calls ideology. The "theory of Japanese society" attempts to clarify the confusing details of local history, changing family and political structures, and other historical and sociological complexities, reducing them to a set of easily grasped, intuitively convincing patterns. At best, the theory of Japanese society helps one see basic, shifting trends in the development of the country; at worst, it degenerates into a confluence of modernization and collective narcissism. Finally, the "theory of the Japanese people" deals with who the Japanese themselves are, their national

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Reinhold further notes that in the late 1980s, 40% of the candidates for election to the Lower House of the Diet were children of current or former Diet members. (Edwin Reingold, *Chrysanthemums and Thorns* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 238.

<sup>20</sup> I want to say here a black piece in a game of Go that has not conquered the interstitial point it occupies, cannot stake a claim to territory for it is merely a temporary position that will be reclaimed through the act of enfolding. Go is a game of positioning, of encirclement, the conquest of space that is exhibited through the entrapment of the other/enemy. To occupy a space in Go is risk losing, for it commits the occupant to a particular position, whereas the game is about relationships between pieces, about bordering, about victory through loss. It is a popular game amongst older Japanese men.

character and personality. Many of these theories seek to delineate an idealized, unimodal personality at the expense of the rich variety of personality types.<sup>21</sup>

The volume of materials produced in *nihonjinron* amounts to a veritable publishing industry ranging from such recognized Japanese classics as psychologist Takeo Doi's *The Anatomy of Dependence* and sociologist Chie Nakane's *Human Relations in a Vertical Society* to American anthropologist Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* to later works (self-) praising Japanese management techniques to – beginning in the 1980s – European-influenced ‘deconstructions’ positing Japan as the world's first postmodern society.<sup>22</sup>

At the risk of indulging in one too many ethnographic generalizations, it is useful to repeat some of the comments arising from *nihonjinron* literature for the sociological portrait of the Japanese in the postwar years; but also because it is revealing about the thinking of both outsiders and Japanese commentators on the subject of the “character” of the Japanese. The *doyenne* of *nihonjinron* is, ironically, the American anthropologist, Ruth Benedict. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was the result of a commission by the American Government near the end of the war to develop an anthropological description of the Japanese that could be useful to American forces about to conquer Japan. She never

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<sup>21</sup>Winston Davis, *Japanese Religion and Society Paradigms of Structure and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 254.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pages, 255-6. There are literally hundreds of works exploring the ‘nature’ of the Japanese - many of them bestsellers. The few titles mentioned above gives only a taste of the various approaches, but as Peter Dale in *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) notes, they are often nationalist in intent; intent, that is, to show the Japanese as exceptional, as different; to embrace the notion of Orientalism as a badge of honour. It is an otherness that suits the conscious and unconscious attempts of the *nihonjinron* practitioners to maintain Japan as a ‘special category,’ a race apart. For Dale, this is used as a justification for the paradoxical, for the hierarchical and regressive nationalist politics that continues to dominate post-war Japan.

visited Japan but based on readings and interviews with 'Japanese Experts' and Japanese-Americans (most in internment camps or working for the U.S. war agencies), Benedict developed a characterization of Japanese society that is still influential. It is also a touchstone for later *nihonjinron* works critiquing simplistic (American) attitudes about the Japanese. With this caveat in mind, her analysis has been best summarized by R.P.

Dore who writes that

Benedict understood the Japanese character as being in large measure the product of explicit training in the need for self-sacrificing pursuit of duty – of duty towards the Emperor, the nation, the family, status, superiors and personal benefactors, and of the duty to maintain one's good name in order to retain the esteem of one's group – a preoccupation which made shame rather than guilt the major moral sanction. Since the duties were particular duties relating to particular spheres of conduct and particular social realities, large areas of life were left free for innocent sensual enjoyment, untroubled, if there was no conflict with duty, by any sense of guilt. This dichotomy was exemplified and reinforced by the discontinuity of childhood training – the indulgence of early childhood contrasting with the sudden requirement of conformist responsible behavior later on. The Japanese had, in short, a 'situational ethic,' which made them well-disciplined moral people in familiar situations but lacking in guide-lines for behavior when – as in wartime – they were faced with a new one.<sup>23</sup>

Benedict herself notes that shame is

the root of virtue. A man who is sensitive to it will carry out all the rules of good behavior. 'A man who knows shame' is sometimes translated 'virtuous man,' sometimes 'man of honor.' Shame has the same place of authority in Japanese ethics that a 'clear conscience,' 'being right with God,' and the avoidance of sin have in Western ethics. Logically enough, therefore, a man will not be punished in the afterlife...they do not recognize post-death reward and punishment or a heaven and a hell.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> R.P. Dore, "The Japanese Personality". Guy Wint, ed., *Asia Handbook* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 565.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (New York: Meridien, 1974), p. 224. The original copyright is 1946.

From both the preceding quotes can be seen the style and content of what would follow. An ethnography stemming from particular observations about ‘the Japanese’ circa 1940s that emphasizes their unique morality and sense of self as a race became an a-historical portrait that would stand for a larger period of time than the social reality would warrant. Though many *nihonjinron* commentators would try and disassociate themselves from the “simplicity” of Benedict’s position, there is little sense that her remarks were seriously challenged or a historically sensitive alternative reading been fully developed to effectively, once and for all, eliminate the anti-historical bias of her work. Yet despite these deficiencies – and they are problems that plague much ethnographic analysis that are not linked to the historical and material conditions of social processes – Benedict opened the door to an understanding of the strict socio-spatial divisions within the society. The concept of ‘shame’ accounts for the contingent nature of Japanese social practices, a ‘situational ethic’ which foregrounds the importance for the Japanese of living within the gaze of each other. The idea that propriety, the ‘proper place’ for certain kinds of behavior over a unified expression of individual self or an all encompassing ‘truth,’ still seems an insightful commentary on this society.

With social anthropologist Chie Nakane, other elements in the portrait of Japanese society can be added. His major work characterizes Japan as a ‘vertical society,’ where social organization and interaction “is not that of horizontal stratification by class or caste but of vertical stratification by institution or group of institutions.”<sup>25</sup> The Japanese are not only group-oriented, but the group is hierarchically organized in a relationship



between paternalistic superiors and their subordinates. Nakane extended this insight into all walks of life. Takeo Doi provided the psychological underpinnings of Nakane's hierarchically arranged groupings by analyzing how this social structure was perpetuated in Japanese society. A practicing psychiatrist, Doi identified *amae* (dependence) as being a key part of the Japanese mentality. Based on the relationship of the 'warm mother' to her child, the suggestion is that this type of dependence is extended into adulthood. Thus in the hierarchical relationship that the child and then the adult moves (whether it be school, company, or any other group), he or she assumes the role of a child dependent upon the security and protection of the superior. The latter in turn reciprocates this through a benevolent behavior more akin to parenting than a Western styled idea of workplace or school behavior. Taken together, Doi and Nakane's work suggests that these emotional relations serve to strengthen the group-orientation by engendering loyalty, a sense of obligation and duty (*giri* in Japanese) toward the goals of the group. In 1950s *nihonjinron* discourse (where their theories were widely accepted and refined), the group could range from the family to school to company to region to nation and to the Emperor as the embodiment of the Japanese people, both past and present. 'Group theory' reinforced the sense of the nation as a family unit, a homogenous race, distinct psychologically (and in some extreme works, physiologically) from all others who would have to be born and bred Japanese to understand, much more feel the spirit of being Japanese.

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<sup>25</sup> Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p.87.

There was a critical element in this theoretical position however. Within the context of modernization, liberal democratic ideals and a historical desire to ‘catch up’ with the West, such behavior, these critics noted, reflected the lack of maturity that a truly autonomous individual should have. Thus these theories, at least in the early days of *nihonjinron* discourse, were the ammunition used by many *nihonjinron* critics to lambast the “childishness” of the Japanese, their imitative, pandering dependency not only on each other but also on the benevolence of their American “superiors.” Ironically, the inversion of these concepts would be used to celebrate the uniqueness and perhaps superiority of Japanese systems in the 1980s as Japanese economic success became the envy of the world.

Some of the perils and pleasures of *nihonjinron* discourse can be found in Hiroshi Minami’s *Psychology of the Japanese People*. Minami’s ‘psychology’ is hardly scientific and seems really just a handy title to imbue his work with more empirical substance (and a certain Western cachet) than it actually contains. However, its quirky blend of ‘psychological’ insight, poetry, folk wisdom, educational and religious manifestos, contemporary literature and personal anecdotes seeks to be a comprehensive summation of the primary qualities that define ‘Japaneseness.’ As such, it is representative of the lay-scientific, intellectual but non-academic nature of most *nihonjinron* work. That being said, Minami’s “Japanese people” are much more complicated than Benedict, Doi or Nakane’s more academic theses. For example, though he begins with a similar comment on the traditional ‘submissiveness’ of the average Japanese to authority and the

importance of “service above self,”<sup>26</sup> he pushes this further in a sub-chapter entitled ‘Keep Deities at a Respectful Distance’ that notes the counter-current of this ‘submissive-no self’ is an “overwhelming passivity, a desire for peace at any price. Submission is shown in toadyism towards one’s superiors, while negativism appears in a please-all attitude, not only towards one’s superiors but also towards one’s colleagues and inferiors.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, Minami sees this submissiveness and self-humility as just a cover, a way of preserving the security of the self in a hierarchical, authoritative society. With the breakdown of the social structure – the inevitable result of the defeat and occupation – people’s hidden egocentricity, concealed and intensified by its repression, begins to bloom. It often takes cynical, selfish forms:

The compulsion to submit not only creates self-interest as a means of negative resistance but it also, on some occasions, induces a positive, rebellious spirit against the coercive power. There is, however, no certainty that this opposition will always take the form of political resistance or a revolution. Especially in Japanese society, the state’s encouragement of submission and coercion even after the Meiji period prevented the development of social and human revolutions. As a result, opposition tended to be expressed as egoistic self-assertion rather than as a direct denial of authority.

Self-assertion based on egocentricity leads not to the establishment of a modern self but to selfish conduct based on individual autonomy. And this selfishness, contrary to self-assertion founded on the recognition of the self of others and on a regard for humanity, stems from distrust of and disdain for man.”<sup>28</sup>

The failure of Japanese capitalism to throw off the shackles of feudalism and Meiji authoritarianism in the social sphere and also inculcate a bourgeois liberalism and

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<sup>26</sup> Hiroshi Minami, trans. Albert R. Ikoma, *Psychology of the Japanese People* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1972). Minami notes that once submission is formed, “orders begin to feel like simply acting in accordance with the demands of nature. In brief, [quoting Koji Izuka’s *The Japanese Military*] “duty becomes internalized and appears subjective and spontaneous.” (P.13)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.15.

Western-styled 'modern self,' Minami argues, has helped to create a Japanese-self based not on individual dignity but on "individual greed."

Turning to one of the autobiographical works (a type of fictionalized non-fiction) that were very popular in the immediate postwar years,<sup>29</sup> Minami evokes the tortured discussions of self that is more ambivalent. He points to Akitsugu Yamazaki's account of his life in *I Pretend to be Evil*, a portrait of a soldier returned to a Japan that no longer abided by its own moral codes. Displaced and cynical, depressed (he would later commit suicide – an occupational hazard for twentieth century Japanese writers) and shattered by his wartime experiences, Yamazaki celebrated egoism and self-interest as being necessary qualities in a brutal and brutalizing world. But in Yamazaki, Minami could find this same quest for self: "In the case of Yamazaki, egocentricity was embodied in efforts to know his limits. That is, he attempted to find out how far he could push his self-assertion using his own ability. In this way he could be convinced of the certainty of his self. Paradoxically, he was subconsciously aware of the uncertainty of his self."<sup>30</sup>

This quality of submission and resistance, anxiety and acceptance is remarkably prevalent in postwar Japanese society, and, as Minami shows, reflected in its literary and artistic output as well as part of its historical legacy. As such, Minami is better able to evoke the 'situational ethic' that allows the individual to negotiate the embrace of the group; that the idea of 'self' in Japan is much more fluid and complex than the more academic psychology of Doi and the sociology of Nakane can account for.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Often referred to as the "I-Novel," this genre continues to be popular in Japan.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

To appreciate the more intellectual and ideological struggles within *nihonjinron* literature, however, it is instructive to briefly look at Lawrence Olson's *Ambivalent Moderns Portraits of Japanese Cultural Identity*. Olson's four portraits begins with Jun Etô, the most conservative of these intellectuals popular in the early postwar years. Etô, like many others, felt great bitterness about the failure of the Occupation to bring about true political and social reform in Japan, yet paradoxically he turned to the Meiji past to reassemble some sense of order and morality to a modern Japan that he saw as decadent and rootless. He championed the importance of a literature that would be politically and morally engaged with the issues of the society as a whole:

Literary creation is a process in which you strive incessantly to readjust yourself to your own past. You achieve your identity only by undergoing this process of readjusting and reintegrating your own self with the organic whole of the culture to which you belong. In this process, you cannot possibly pick out one element of your heritage without also owning up to another; no facet of one's heritage can be suppressed. The past always comes to you as an organic, indivisible identity. It is no more, no less, than that.<sup>31</sup>

Olson argues that Etô's investigation of the past would eventually lead him beyond the Meiji period with its first embrace of Western values and ideological precepts to search for a fundamental Japanese essence. It was bound to failure. Though he could never answer the questions he posed himself, Etô's quest is indicative of the desire for some distinctive and cohesive moral structure that would unify and give purpose to the nation. Like so many others it would result in a desire to reassert national pride; though Etô never pandered to a simplistic or unambiguous nationalism.

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<sup>31</sup> Cited in Lawrence Olson, *Ambivalent Moderns Portraits of Japanese Cultural Identity* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), p. 38.

Whereas Jun Etô looked west for the model – but not the content – of a confident modern society, Yoshimi Takeuchi was a leading socialist academic, a specialist in Chinese literature, who was virulently anti-American in his politics. Takeuchi was widely admired, even by those who did not share his Marxist views, because of his questioning of a Western-influenced modernization program and his desire to seek models from societies closer to home. Notes Olson:

Perceived by his peers as a serious-minded nationalist, he brought into focus a widely held feeling that the borrowing of half-digested ideas from the West in the pursuit of a modern society had derogated from Japanese pride and self-respect. His specific “Chinese” solution was unacceptable to most, yet on the issue of modernization he filed a minority report that was greatly admired. One colleague thought that he had “reinforced his selfhood.”<sup>32</sup>

Again the calling card for Takeuchi, as it was for Etô, was the evocation of nationalist pride. He “touched deep romantic emotions in many hearts. For it should not be forgotten that intellectual discourse during Takeuchi’s era [primarily 1945 to the mid-60s] was dominated by fear: fear of the ugly past’s returning, of involvement in the Cold War, of too much “modernization” or too little. Behind the fear lay considerable national weakness, but the fear was always greater than the weakness.”<sup>33</sup>

Attempting to steer a path between the embrace of the West or of China, was Takaaki Yoshimoto. He is, in many ways however, the most confused. He sought to define an indigenous sensibility in “the sentiments, expressive language and emotional life of ‘the people.’”<sup>34</sup> Yet he was never able to coherently define who “the people” were.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid* p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p 76.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p 79.

Many critics suspected that they were more metaphysical than real, a romantic yearning for an agrarian community long gone.<sup>35</sup> Despite this, Yoshimoto's writing were very popular and there was great sympathy for his elusive concept, perhaps, Olson suggests, because they were irrational, antithetical to the cold-hearted logic of Western empirical thought.

The fourth notable intellectual whose work and career Olson sketches is Shunsuke Tsurumi. More eclectic than the others, he was a leader in the protest movement against the renewal of the Security Treaty with America in 1960. A well-informed Harvard educated scholar in American nineteenth and twentieth century literature (upholding it against the paucity of Japanese literary work), yet also an authoritative commentator on Japanese popular culture and a social theorist seeking to connect with "the people" in a manner similar to Takaaki Yoshimoto, Tsurumi understood that the quest for a 'national essence' was probably futile and "[b]orrowed things will remain in Japanese thought for a long time to come."<sup>36</sup> In response to the Vietnam War, his politics became more radicalized and his faith in institutions in both America and Japan were considerably weakened. He joined a group, the League for Peace in Vietnam, participating in many acts of civil disobedience to protest the war. Yet a feeling that he did not do enough to protest his own country's military exploits during the 1930s and 40s always haunted his pacifism. Thus Tsurumi remained concerned with the present and the past and, notes Olson, "one was left with impression of a dilemma of

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<sup>35</sup> Another related *nihonjinron* theme was that Japan was a "rice culture," which is what accounts for it being a cooperative society versus individualistic, competitive Western societies.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, p.142.

tradition and modernity unreconciled. It was the dilemma of Japanese culture as a whole raised to the level of acute self-consciousness in an iconoclastic mind.”<sup>37</sup>

Though diverse in their ideological approaches and conclusions, what links these four writers is the concern to define or redefine the cultural distinctiveness of Japan. This obsession “expressed a very human and universal quest for identity,” but adds Olson, “from the first to the last it was bound by the constraints of the nationality it sought to define.”<sup>38</sup> If it contained ambivalence towards the West (the deliverer of nuclear annihilation and liberation!), this ambivalence was also targeted at the modern, at the historical changes responsible for the psychic shock of the new and the uncertain. The work of these commentators expressed the anxiety and confusion stemming from the immediate postwar years, a sense that in the breakdown of the stern moral parameters and historical purpose of the preceding Edo period (1600 to 1860s) and Meiji, Taisho and early Showa eras (or the last one hundred years – Japan still uses the reign of the Emperor as well as the Gregorian calendar to mark temporal duration) had left a nation bereft of a distinctive identity, or alternatively, an identity under siege. Yet in the very nature of the question or search for this identity can be seen the assumption that this stable entity exists. It was simply a matter of defining it or reaffirming it against the temporal rush arriving like a tsunami upon the shores of Japan. This defensive, ‘we-are-not-that’ quality would inevitably lead to an attempt to aggressively establish a national identity out of its own historical roots, the shared land of their ancestors. In a culture where one’s parents are, upon death, cremated, given a new ‘death’ name and prayed to as part of daily

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.151



ceremonial rites, the postwar generation, still scarred by a decade of conflict in which their ‘parents’ were partially exposed (though not completely) as fascistic, brutal and shamed by defeat, the twisting and turning of these *nihonjinron* writers would seem a long wake; instead of the awakening promised but then deferred by the Occupation.

For a country where “the past was not only made congruous with the future but was invoked to legitimize its emergence,”<sup>39</sup> it was important to investigate how earlier intellectuals engaged with the realities that confronted the nation before one could appreciate the sense of loss and confusion during the postwar era. The sense of loss, argues Tatsuo Arima, was not as important as recognizing the sense of failure. Indeed, there is a sense of political naiveté that characterized Taisho era (1920s, in particular) intelligentsia in the face of the era’s creeping fascism. This authoritarian impulse was itself a legacy of the early Meiji Reformation (or Restoration as it is also called) that was a ‘revolution’ by the elite to make Japan strong in the face of the foreign threat, but also a means of maintaining its position in what it saw as inevitable change (whether it be through reform or conquest). Rather than a seeking a defining essence, Arima argues that one had to look at the result of the disengagement of the supposedly progressive thinkers within the society so as to begin to assemble how the nation could be constructed. Instead of the incessant whining about the loss of self – a distraction that would serve the prevailing elite since it kept the question of real political change away from the corridors of power – it was more important and necessary to develop a committed political position

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.153.

<sup>39</sup> Tatsuo Arima, *The Failure of Freedom A Portrait of Modern Japanese Intellectuals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p.3.

that would realistically create, rather than succumb to ethereal notions of what comprised the national self. In any case, Arima postulates, that national ‘sacrosanct’ self was very much a creation by Meiji reformers as a matter of political expediency; not some eternal cultural legacy. Theirs was a top-down revolution and their failure “to expand the emotional experience of emancipation beyond the level of the philosophical, the religious, and the aesthetic into the realm of social reality is part of the general failure to preserve and foster the constitutional form of government.”<sup>40</sup> Thus it is only through an equally forceful act of political will – and for Arima this is primarily a Marxist ideology – that the new Japan could be born.

Arima’s work focuses on the *Taishô* era (considered a socially liberal, progressive-minded time slowly being undermined by growing political fascism); however, writing in the late 1960s, Arima’s polemical stance does reflect back on the *nihonjinron* of the postwar, and his insights about the lack of a firm ideological basis for much of their thought is still a useful critique of the search for a viable national identity.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the wide variance in *nihonjinron* thought, it generally reflects a continued obsession with the question of national identity (or *kokutai*, ‘national essence’) that reaches into all corners of Japanese culture and society. Most – and Arima is a particularly intelligent exception – presuppose the uniqueness of the nation and its people as the basis from which to explicate the strengths and weaknesses of Japan and the Japanese ‘system.’ As Kosaku Yoshino notes, competition was so fierce in this literary

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>41</sup> More attention will be paid to his critique of Kitaro Nishida in a later section, as the importance of Nishida’s philosophy exerted a profound influence on twentieth century Japanese thought.

industry that its content covered “the whole range of Japanese culture, using as their illustrative materials everyday episodes, contemporary news, travelogues, folklore materials and so on.”<sup>42</sup> Yoshino, in fact, goes on to agree with Peter Dale that it is “the commercialized expression of modern Japanese nationalism.”<sup>43</sup> The breadth of the literature and its vast readership, however, also suggests just how necessary it was for intellectuals in postwar Japan to define the moment, to publicly argue about what is ‘truly Japanese’ during a time of social and political change. Yet there were inherent dangers. Dale vehemently argues that because *nihonjinron* literature in Japan is not understood as intellectual constructs but as objective descriptions of social mores,

it is the subtlest of instruments of ideological coercion, and a “self-fulfilling” prophecy since it reflects and conditions in turn manipulated categories and modes of expression diffused for the discussion of how the Japanese are supposed to perceive themselves. Such an enculturation of political discourse is potentially a more powerful form of social control than prewar “thought policing” since, though demonstrably heir to the ideological patrimony of Japanese fascism, the ideological roots of these ideas have been forgotten, while the ideas themselves are hailed as new conceptualisations and ethnological descriptions of Japanese realities.<sup>44</sup>

Yoshino and Dale are just two of a number of critics who have criticized *nihonjinron* discourse for its perpetuation of the fascist principles of wartime nationalism. The quantity and diversity of this literature is such that no quick summary can be effectively made, however Yoshino notes that the “mode of explanation in the *nihonjinron* is best described as that of culturalism (or cultural determinism or cultural

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<sup>42</sup> Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* (London: Routledge 1992) p.3. Both Yoshino and Dale are part of a group of writers whose work is a kind of meta-critique of *Nihonjinron* practices.

<sup>43</sup> Dale, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Dale, p. 17.

reductionism). Culture is seen as infrastructural, and social, economic and political phenomena are often seen as symptoms of immanent culture.”<sup>45</sup>

The desire to understand present reality as culturally determined has deep roots within the artistic and religious practices of Japanese society. It is a two-fold process whereby religion is fundamental to political and ethical behavior and also central to aesthetic traditions. Indeed, what may mark the modernization ‘turn,’ is the dissolution of religious ideals (and attendant moral precepts) into artistic processes and cultural identity as its spiritual-philosophical value steadily declined. Understanding how this process operated may help one to begin to discern the shape of the cultural force acting upon the imagination of the *nihonjinron* writers in the first two decades of the postwar.

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This is a necessarily brief description of the three major religio-philosophical traditions. It is not a history of Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism; rather an attempt to demonstrate how they functioned within the social dynamics of the society.

Though the least internationally known of the Japanese religions, Shinto is the oldest and the only major religious tradition indigenous to Japan. Byron Earhart notes that Shinto grew

out of historic Japanese beliefs and practices – especially those revering nature. Shinto means, literally, "the way of many *kami*" (spirits and deities), and usually these *kami* either helped create aspects of nature or are themselves expressed in natural forms. Families, and villages as groups of families, worshipped local *kami* as the source of blessing for agriculture (especially rice) and their group life. The power of the *kami*, as the force behind and within life, was seen to reside within

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<sup>45</sup> Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.10.

natural objects.... This direct appreciation of nature and sincere acceptance of the blessing of kami is favored, rather than the development of complicated doctrine or abstract philosophy. Leading a pure and sincere life under the blessing of many kami is at the heart of Shinto ideals."<sup>46</sup>

These ideas are echoed in the writings of the 14th century Shinto theologian Imbe-no Masami-chi:

*Kami* is from *kagami* [mirror]. This is abbreviated and read *Kami*. The Divine Mind, like a clear mirror, reflects all things in nature. It operates with impartial justice and tolerates not a single spot of uncleanness. That which in Heaven is *Kami*, in nature is Spirit and in man is sincerity. If the spirit of nature and the heart of man are pure and clear, then they are *Kami*.<sup>47</sup>

Its simplicity, historical roots as the primary nativist religion in Japan, and concern for purity would make Shinto an apt choice for nationalists bent on restructuring and empowering the nation in its quick transition to the modern age. Thus since Meiji times (1860s to just before World War I) and until the defeat in 1945, it was linked to Emperor worship and given the status of State Shinto, the preeminent religion; the Emperor was considered divine, a kami, and Shinto the expression of his desires for the nation. From this, the Meiji authorities and the later Showa period fascists encouraged a deep sense of nationalism and purpose (or destiny) that would ultimately lead to the imperialist fantasies of what the Japanese call the "fifteen-year war" (1930-45; its war in China and then the Pacific). Shinto mysticism -- its animist, non-textual beliefs that embraced the spirit of one's ancestors and even the soil and animals of Japan, as well as a preoccupation with purity of the self, of the race under the Emperor (viewed as a direct

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<sup>46</sup> H. Byron Earhart, *Religions of Japan Many Traditions Within One Sacred Way* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 16-17.

descendant of the Sun Goddess, Ametarasu, creator of Japan) -- was exploited for its racist potential to the extent that the battle-cry 'Long Live the Emperor!' became a cry for oneself as a human being and a Japanese.

After the war, Shinto became less an active element than a representative one. Its power comes not from being actively endorsed as a creed. Rather, Shinto is practiced as part of the due reverence given to ancestors, in the 'baptism' of children and the blessing of marriages. Its teachings remain muted – like the Emperor – but gains power by being mysterious, unarticulated, symbolic. Therefore, despite its silence, Shintoism still has a unique position and force, especially for contemporary nationalists. But even in this silence, Shinto rites and ceremonies are widely observed in Japan; and its priests are central figures in parades and festivals faithfully occurring each year. Often these are practices closely tied to seasonal agricultural cycles or simply as part of traditional observances that go back many hundreds of years. They are often associated with particular villages or towns and are considered part of a region's historical legacy. Shinto represents more often than not a form of solidarity in a community as much as an experiential way of showing respect for nature or emperor. In many cases, the 'special nature' of these Shinto-inspired festivities revolves around a particular dance, or costuming; or even a distinct (to the region) local product. In any event, the explicitly religious impulse is essentially muted and the idea of pride in the social and cultural characteristics of the region is emphasized.

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* (New York: The Free

Contemporary Japanese, obviously not Confucian in the way that their Tokugawa ancestors were, are still permeated with Confucian ethical values. Confucianism probably has more influence on them than does any other of the traditional religions or philosophies... Behind the wholehearted Japanese acceptance of modern science, modern concepts of progress and growth, universalistic principles of ethics, and democratic ideals and values strong Confucian traits still lurk beneath the surface, such as the belief in the moral basis of government, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships and loyalties, and the faith in education and hard work. Almost no one considers himself Confucian today, but in a sense almost all Japanese are.<sup>48</sup>

As Reischauer intimates, Confucianism is hardly recognized anymore as a religion in Japan. Though its roots go back to at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Japan (and over 2500 years in China), it is commonly regarded as influencing the social and political structures more in terms of traditional attitudes than religious cosmology. When Confucianism is considered in Oriental societies as a whole it is usually in regards to its legacy than its actual, still-vibrant presence. Indeed, in the Japanese context, it is primarily represented as being the source of tradition that the forces of modernization (and democracy and liberalism) have either changed or in the process of changing.<sup>49</sup>

Such a characterization would be, according to Gilbert Rozman, misleading. Confucianism, perhaps more than any other philosophical idea, may be the one general trait that a number of Oriental societies share. It is elemental when speaking about the

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Press, 1985), p. 66. This is a re-issue of the 1957 classic with a new Introduction by the author.

<sup>48</sup> Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 214.

<sup>49</sup> Max Weber, usually insightful about the relationship between religion and social praxis, has some trouble understanding the link between Confucianism and the development of a modern, industrial state. He argues that Chinese Confucianism acted as an obstacle to modernization (and capitalism) in China but a different version abetted the processes in Japan. Later critics argue that Weber has misinterpreted the situation. It was not that the brands of Confucianism were so radically different; rather it points to their relative position in the particular societies. For a further discussion of Weber's thesis, see Gilbert Rozman, "Modern Comparisons of China and Japan," in G. Rozman, ed. *The East Asian Region* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991), and Winston Davis, *Japanese Religion and Society Paradigms of Structure and Change* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1992).

'national character' of these nations, and, conversely, it is the extent to which they have adapted Confucianism into a modern context that serves to define their differences.

Regardless of the debate over the continued effect of this ancient philosophy, its central tenets are not in doubt. Confucianism is generally seen as "of this world." Its mystical aspects tend toward identifying 'The Way' as the natural order of the cosmos, but, unlike Buddhism and Shintoism, this is directly linked to the necessity for social order. Rozman describes it thus:

Confucianism starts with the assumption that human nature is good and that virtuous leadership can produce moral and diligent behavior in others. Implied in this worldview is a moral appeal based on successful education -- good models, good rituals, good communications, and, above all, good teachers in all settings from the home to national leadership. Along with this idealism (associated with the teachings of Mencius and with Neo-Confucianism that spread to Korea and Japan) was a deep strain of realism (from the teachings of Hsun Tzu and borrowed from Legalism) emphasizing collective responsibility and hierarchical social control.<sup>50</sup>

Confucianism tries to instill -- in a paternalistic way -- the values of diligence, loyalty, spiritual strength, or more specifically, right conduct according to one's position in the hierarchy. The goal is harmony within society, one that mirrors or is in tune with the harmony of nature and the cosmos itself. In this way, Confucianism engenders specific rules and regulations for its followers that result in a conservative response to life; but one that treasures wisdom over faith, practicality over fundamentalism. As such, it is eminently adaptable and pragmatic in response to the changing times; a kind of 'progressive conservatism.'

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 16



Its spirituality is always understated, preferring to stress the social value of filial piety promoted to the larger canvass of the nation. Therefore, at least in Japan, Confucianism eschews temples or religious ceremonies, but compensates through its religious practices becoming translated into social praxis. Its success in this regard is so complete that Reischauer, Rozman and Martin Colcutt would argue that Confucianism is ingrained in the Japanese psyche.<sup>51</sup> For example, typical insights about the Japanese character -- the desire for harmony, the obedience of its citizens, the dominance of group over individual, the importance of continuity over radical breaks with the past, the diligence of its populace, respect for the elderly, the acceptance of seniority in the workplace over ability, even the business practices of companies that cherish personal association over immediate economic benefit -- have been traced back to Confucian rules of behavior. The strength of this legacy, argues Robert Bellah, is such that even the two recent waves of modernization Japan experienced (the 1860s and post-World War II) have been bolstered by the practical social ethic of Confucianism that celebrates an inner strength as a way of performing one's duties to the state. Given this parameter, it could serve any number of changing sociopolitical or economic contexts:

(One) general conclusion is that religion (primarily Confucianism, but also the blend of other religious influences) played an important role in the process of political and economic rationalization in Japan through maintaining and intensifying commitment to the central values, supplying motivation and legitimation for certain necessary political innovations and reinforcing an ethic of inner worldly asceticism which stressed diligence and economy. That it may also

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Colcutt, Colcutt, M. 1991. "The Legacy of Confucianism in Japan." In: G. Rozman, ed. *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

have played an important part in the formation of the central values, which were favorable to industrialization, is at least a strong possibility.<sup>52</sup>

Confucian scholar, Charles Wei-hsun Fu, supports the contention that links Confucianism and economic growth, but only – and this is an important contextualization that must always be kept in mind – if Confucianism as part of a grander Japanese tradition is stressed:

Japan's radical modifications of the original Chinese form of Confucianism was able to create the "transformational potential," thereby paving the way for the subsequent development of Japanese business and economy. Nonetheless, in light of my proposed thesis, I want to be rather cautious, contrary to quite a number of scholars who tend to over exaggerate the ideological contributions of Japanese Confucianism in causal relationship to Japan's economic growth in modern times. The isolation of Confucianism from other cultural factors cannot be sanctioned if principles of scientific investigation are to be upheld and a sound hermeneutic inquiry is to be attempted. As I have stated in my "Japanese Spiritual Resources and their Contemporary Relevance," no other major tradition in the world has manifested attitudinal ambiguity, pluralistic diversity, and ideological complexity as much as the Japanese tradition. In most cases, Japanese religions not only coexist without involving any serious confrontation, but also often mutually influence and assimilate each other to form a syncretic religious ideology at the expense of the original purity and integrity of each religious tradition.<sup>53</sup>

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Whereas Confucianism and the elusive Shinto exert more influence in the everyday behaviors and ethical choices of the society -- including the sense of nationalism -- Buddhism provides a deeper, wider metaphysical understanding of being in

<sup>52</sup> Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion*, p. 194.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Wei-hsun Fu, "A Methodical Examination of the "Post-Confucian Thesis" in Relation to Japanese (and Chinese) Economic Development," in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, eds. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995), p. 111. Fu relates that the 17<sup>th</sup> century Confucian teacher, Ansai Yamasaki, asked his presumably devout Confucian

the world. In its doctrines, Buddhism offers relatively fewer regulations in terms of how one should act or conduct oneself in the world; rather, it articulates rules of engagement with which to meet existential as opposed to social obligations.<sup>54</sup> At the root of this is the rejection of the *samsaric* world, the world of endless suffering, the great wheel that characterizes the apparent, the visible dynamics of time and space. The world we live in, as portrayed by Buddhism is dream-like, unreal, and it is from this we must be awakened. True reality is ultimately empty and Buddhism offers up an existential encounter with this meaninglessness. The encounter must ultimately reach beyond language for language is associated with the antinomies of conceptual thinking that can only lead to the endless (and thus fruitless) work of reason with its basis in difference; not the eternal emptiness of 'true' existence. Language and reason, by their nature, will always misrepresent this truth and because they are implicated in will (or desire and intent) and duality, they are subject to the infinite progression of time, not the unified silence/emptiness of eternity. Instead, the intuitive, existential approach of Buddhism -- especially in the Zen tradition - - allows the movement through reason to the 'ground' of Being, the emptiness which is unspoken and in any event, indescribable, but from which existence can be. 'Ground' has to remain in parenthesis because it is not such a stable concept, but one marked by eternal change. Harold Coward, perhaps, gives a better summary of this essential idea in Buddhist philosophy and the moral consequences:

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students what they would do if Chinese Confucianists invaded Japan? Since there was no response, Yamasaki provided his own answer: take up arms against the invaders, loyalty to the homeland comes first.  
<sup>54</sup> This tricky generalization must be tempered by the recognition that religio-existential versus social practices are seldom clearly separated. Also, there are various sects within Buddhism that are as stern and prescriptive in their 'rules' as any Christian fundamentalist sect.

[T]he Buddhists deny the existence of any immutable core and conceive of everything as being in flux. Existence for the Buddhist is momentary (*ksanika*), unique (*svalaksana*), and unitary (*dharmamâtra*). It is discontinuous, discrete, and devoid of complexity. All notions of continuing substance or self are illusory thought-constructions formulated under the spell of ignorance (*avidyâ*) or wrong belief. The empirical outcome of such illusory belief in a self is ego-selfishness for material goods, sensuous pleasures, political power over others, and, worst of all for a philosopher, ego-attachment to one's own theories, thus rendering all thought corrupt.<sup>55</sup>

When this attachment is negated by the simple act of desire-less vision and acceptance, then the world will re-appear in all its immanent glory -- its suchness, its true ever-changing face.

No quick summary can do justice to the paradoxical and intuitive vision of Buddhism but it is certainly clear that the idea of nothingness is not limited in its purest expression to the issue of national identity. After about fifteen hundred years in Japan, however, this pure expression of Buddhist ideals has been tempered. It too, at various times and to varying degrees, has been subsumed or provided sustenance to the demands of nationhood and the everyday needs of selfhood. The metaphysical understanding of Buddhism allows, whether it wants to or not, a passivity and acceptance that would serve the particular powers that be. For example, the spirit of sacrifice and honor, fearlessness in the face of death, self-discipline and contemplation that make up the samurai warrior code - *Bushido* - is indebted to Zen Buddhism and Confucianism in the way that inner spiritual development could be used to produce a chivalrous warrior in the service of the state. In fact, the samurai became the ultimate expression of fidelity to the nation. The

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<sup>55</sup> Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1990), p.8.

result is that what began as (and still is in a muted way) a theology promulgating ideas about existence that were transhistorical, anti-institutional, beyond the flux of time and space, became in time subject to history, to place. Buddhism too found its position within the *Nihonjinron* and contributes to the sociological understanding of Japanese identity.

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Zen Buddhism is central to the spatio-temporal thesis at play here (and will be addressed more specifically in the next chapter) since so much of Japanese twentieth century philosophy is steeped in it. But, for now, I merely want it to be understood as existing in relation to the other religio-philosophical traditions. It is important to note, as well, a number of other influences and traditions that crisscross present-day and historical Japan. Earhart refers to the cluster of folk religion -- Taoism (in an indirect manner); a host of 'new' religions such as Sokka Gakkai, Nembatsu and Tenkyo among others; and 'older' religions such as Nichiren, Jodo Shinsho (both forms of Buddhism), and so forth -- as contributing to the major religions to form what he calls "Japanese Religion." These sects are primarily a combination of various elements emanating from the three principal religions and are fascinating and influential in their own right.<sup>56</sup> But in terms of disturbing the nexus of ideas generated by the aforementioned ones, and in terms of their relationship to the society, they are not as distinctive. Instead they are inserted, like so many other ideas and inventions, into a culture that is "multi-layered or multidimensional in structure," writes Tesujiro Watsuji:

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<sup>56</sup> Earhart, *Religions of Japan*, pp. 9-24.

In Japanese culture none of the multiple factors on different levels has ever lost its right to exist. It is one of the remarkable characteristics of Japanese culture that even those factors which have been somewhat subjugated, can still survive in the role of the subjugated. It seems to me that there is no other race, other than the Japanese, as sensitive to the absorption of new elements, nor as faithful in preserving its own age-old [traditions]. This is true in all aspects of everyday life or in historical development on the social level, as well as in religion, art, thinking, economy and politics.<sup>57</sup>

Of particular import here is that despite allegiance to one religion, there is respect or -- and this is often the case -- a devotion to at least one other religious tradition. This can partially be accounted for by the fact that the religions have in some respects blended together to become Japanese Religion. As such, they are linked to the concept of nation and contribute to the sense of uniqueness the Japanese have so often felt about themselves. But equally necessary to understand is that there is a pragmatic distance that seems to pervade the Japanese character in regard to religious practices. A sense that the inner world of the self is constituted one way and the outer social self another -- a separation supported by many sociological observations about the influence of ideas about *ura/omote* (inside/outside the house) and *honne/tatemaya* (true feelings versus publicly expressed opinion) that serve as a trope throughout the society. This separation extends to the way that each new religion or philosophical idea, throughout Japanese history, has been adapted and altered to fit into the existing social and national fabric. A product of this separation and nationalistic urge is that even with religious influences permeating the society, the textual, message-oriented ideas are often not explicitly encountered. The forms are observed but the sense of a shattering epiphany, a revolution

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<sup>57</sup> Cf *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, p. 113.

in the recognition of the self or society is negated. Rather, these influences are refracted through the rituals and ceremonies of religion, and, importantly, the aesthetic forms. Projected out, so to speak, they essentially find a 'place' within the society. This dissolution of religion proper into social rules, ceremonial obligations and aesthetics undermines any hegemony of a singular religious tradition and allows many religions through this displacement to exist in harmony with the each other. What contains them is the idea of the nation to which they all are seen as contributing. In a way, the plethora of religions existing in harmony (though they often compete for dominance) reveals a secularization of the society. Each religious tradition is utilized for its contribution to the social order but cannot have a cosmological dominance over the individual or the nation (pre-1945 State Shinto being the obvious exception when Shintoism was consciously promoted by nationalists to advance their cause). Thus through sheer endurance, adaptability, displacement and separation, the religions of Japan together have helped to define notions of 'Japaneseness;' but the effect upon the individual is dulled or, redirected toward a sense of the individual as part of a group. Therefore, religion becomes a profound and powerful expression of national identity. Ben Dasan, for one, argues that, "the entire Japanese nation is a body of faithful followers of Nihonism, which is based on human experience instead of a covenant or body of dogma."<sup>58</sup> Yoshino comments in this regard bear repeating:

Nihonism in this sense is a 'secular religion.' As a humane religion, the principles of Nihonism are not articulated or codified into words and law. Nihonism allows

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<sup>58</sup> Isaiah Ben Dasan, translated by Richard L. Gage, *The Japanese and the Jews* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1972), p. 91. This quirky bestseller (in Japan) compares the two civilizations, and, reports Yoshino, may have triggered a whole new round of *nihonjinron* in the 1970s.

the contradictions and ambivalence of 'human beingness' (*ningensei*). For the Japanese, *ningensei* is the primary source of moral value, and symbolic representations like words, reason and law remain of secondary significance.... Ben Dasan's characterization of the Japanese may be rephrased as the 'social preoccupation' and 'interactional relativism' of the Japanese. The Japanese are described as being extremely sensitive to and concerned about social interaction and relationships and attach much less importance to a more generalised criterion of judging conduct such as ideology or religious dogma.<sup>59</sup>

In speaking about "Japanese Religion" then, one is in effect referring to "Nihonism." The effect of this blending of individual religions into one 'Japanese Religion' is that they remain distinctive but interrelated through the auspices of national identity: *How* this appears to operate is that each complements the other. Each provides principles that can be utilized in the construction of 'Japaneseness.' Partly, this has been accomplished through a transfer of religious ideals into social praxis. For example, Shinto promotes the Emperor as divine, the direct descendant of Ametarasu (the Sun Goddess, creator of the Japanese people) and thus all Japanese are a 'chosen race.' Shinto's animist character 'peoples' the landscape with deities and sites of the sacred. The ceremonies and festivals serve to deepen, institutionalize and naturalize this process to the extent that Japan exists as a sacred space -- the landscaped garden of the gods.

Confucianism re-casts this idea of divinity and sacred space into a practical social structure. The harmony of the cosmos that the hierarchical social order is supposed to mimic became less a universal principle than one particularized to Japan. This ideological

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<sup>59</sup> Yoshino, 1992. pages. 21-22.



function was so useful that eventually Confucianism lost its status as a religion in Japan and served primarily as a way of ethically organizing the society.<sup>60</sup>

Buddhism, the most potentially destabilizing of the religions to the goal of national unity because of its distrust of phenomenological reality (or more precisely, its questioning of accepted notions of reality), became the expression of metaphysical yearnings. Where Shinto rites are followed for births and weddings, Buddhist rites serve the dead. Interestingly, the Japanese-Buddhist version of funerals aims to turn the deceased family member into a benevolent spirit; and depending on the person, even a kind of deity. This transformation is such that a new name is given to the deceased and he or she takes an honored place in the altar of the home to be prayed to every morning; a tradition of ancestor worship that may belong more to Shinto and Confucianism than Buddhism.

The second notable transference or transformation of religious expression and practice in Japan comes not from the dissemination of scriptural ideals into the moral fabric of the nation, but through their reflection in aesthetic practices. In essence, religion became social ethic, ceremonial practice and artistic expression. Its possibility of a personal encounter with deep metaphysical mysteries was diluted in the course of a long history of social and cultural praxis. In the postwar era, with the dissolution of State Shinto, the sublimation of Confucian ethical principles that had traditionally guided public service and the virtual transformation of Buddhism into ceremonial and aesthetic

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<sup>60</sup> The non-religious nature of Confucianism in Japan may be what accounts for Max Weber's inability to see how this 'religion' could have the opposite effect on capitalist growth and historical change than it did

functions (at the expense of its spiritual insight), religion in Japan became more a representation of the idea of Japaneseness than an openly powerful spiritual or ideological force. (The interesting exception here is the *Sokka Gakkai* – the force behind the Clean Government party that espouses a conservative, supposedly Buddhist position, but has remained very much a minority operating behind the scenes to elect politicians sympathetic to its ideals. Even here, however, hardly any mention is ever made of what specifically Buddhist vision of the state exists; because, one suspects, there is not really one. It is just a cover for a conservative ideological bias).

What religious practice remains is through the observation of traditional rituals and ceremonies, the practice of forms without content. The individual is therefore ‘free’ of the inherent moral-spiritual principles of religion – electing to pay only lip service to habitual performances – but enclosed within Nihonism. Religion, for the most part, became a way of being (Japanese), not a way to change the society or to alter one’s way of life.

Where is the individual in this process? Unlike the West, the autonomy of the individual was never fully realized, at least not in the same public, celebrated way. The ethical structures stressed the interrelationships within which the individual was enmeshed. Whether it is family, state, community or workplace, the person existed as part of a group – the argument provided by Nakane and buttressed by Doi. And the dominance of this group demanded that the individual cultivate qualities to re-affirm the harmony and stability of the group. Right conduct was dependent upon the needs and expectations

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in China. Weber’s “dismissive” treatment of Japanese Confucianism seems to gall *nihonjinron* scholars of

of the group and as such tended towards contingency (Minami, 1973). The self responded to its position within the web of relationships and could easily shift if the context changed. The idea, for example, that one's behavior outside the home should be similar to behavior inside the home was considered somewhat irrational. Each position represented a role that had to be played and was only complementary in that the performance due to each position was kept separated. Many a samurai drama, for example, hinges on the conflicting needs of each role; and seldom does the individual's desires or domestic space triumph.

The primacy of the group became in time the primacy of the state. The sacrifices and bending of the will to accommodate the shifting social requirements would inevitably undermine the will to power of the individual.<sup>61</sup> Another result would be that in spite of the cosmological cocoon produced by the interplay of the three primary religions, the individual thus socialized may remain, ironically, secular. There is always the sense that religious ideals are functional but do not give a complete description of being in the world. The only ideal that would offer such a conception of self would be the idea of

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all stripes.

<sup>61</sup> In language, the Japanese avoid the use of "I" and "You," finding them somewhat vulgar. Sentences such as "I am going to Tokyo" would literally translate as "going to Tokyo." The meaning of a statement thus primarily depends on the context within which it is spoken. Pronouns, especially personal pronouns, are avoided. Verbs too play their part. For example, the expression "give this to me" would translate as "give this" because the verb for "give to" someone is different from "give to" me.

Another aspect worth noting is that the verb comes at the end of a statement thus the active doing by an individual or group is not stressed. An air of 'being done to' rather than the individual instigating or performing an action suggests a kind of passivity that infects the Japanese character at the level of language. At the very least, it promotes humility. Robert Christopher also emphasizes "a distinctively Japanese phenomenon: an obsession with comparative status in all personal relationships. Confusingly, verb forms in Japanese – and even basic verb stems – alter sharply depending upon the speaker's hierarchical relationship to the person being spoken to." Robert Christopher, *The Japanese Mind: The Goliath Explained* (New York: Linden Press, 1983), p. 40.

Japaneseness. While Confucianism and Buddhism offer up cosmological scenarios, they are imported religions that have been adapted to fit the Japanese character.<sup>62</sup> The group ethos, the overwhelming desire for harmony in relation to the cosmos promoted by Confucianism, the Buddhist suspicion of any stable state of being in the world and the self's position in it, and the indigenous Shintoism's celebration of ancestral roots in the soil of the nation much more than any sense of individuality, act as a kind of "passive enablement," allowing this 'character' the freedom to attenuate itself to the demands of the state. The sacred, then, exists within a public sphere. Social (re: sacred) space belongs to the family, group, nation. (Even as the sacred is 'expressed' outward onto the landscape of the nation, it is marked off, spatialized; like the Emperor, a living mute, mysterious symbol). Religion does not account for all facets – the inner and outer life – of the

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<sup>62</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt states a similar point when he notes that:

ontological conceptions that stressed (as in all Axial civilizations) the chasm between the transcendental and mundane orders, between "nature" and "culture," were shifted in a more "immanentist" direction. This led to a much stronger emphasis on the mutual embeddedness of the cultural and natural orders and a very heavy emphasis on nature as given rather than as constructed according to transcendental principles.

It is, however, probably with respect to the conception of the national collectivity and its relation to the broader Confucian and Buddhist civilizations, as well as with respect to conceptions of authority, especially imperial authority, that the ideological transformation of Buddhism and Confucianism was most fully manifest.... Buddhism, as well as Confucianism, had a powerful impact indeed on the definition of the overall "national" Japanese community and on the basic concept or premises of authority in Japan – the heavy emphasis on commitment to center, on hierarchy, and on group solidarity. Confucianism and Buddhism imbued these definitions with a very strong moral or metaphysical dimension.

S.N. Eisenstadt, "Some Observations on the Transformation of Confucianism (and Buddhism) in Japan," in *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity*, edited by Tu Wei-Ming (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 178.

individual. Thus from this spatial division of the sacred and secular arises a self that is pragmatic, contextual and provisional.<sup>63</sup>

The implications of the externalizing of religion into a sense of the sacredness of the nation and the consequent secularization of the individual are multiple. No one religion is denied or exclusively embraced. Each new faith is allowed a place and even as time progresses, no one is eliminated; rather there is a retrofitting of the tradition to enable the arising circumstance. This can also be re-stated inversely. To maintain itself, each religion protects its existence by doing whatever is necessary to accommodate the altered circumstance. Time must be corralled to affirm the spatial separation, which in turn must be maintained to tame the potential destructiveness of time. Therefore, while there can be much talk of the importance of religious ideals within the society and acknowledgment of its effect upon the culture, ultimately to pursue an understanding of Japan it is necessary to go beyond religio-philosophical conceptions into the social and aesthetic implications of elemental notions of time and space: A secular understanding of the sacred.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Without consciously intending to, I have arrived back at an idea similar to Ruth Benedict's assertion that Japan is a 'shame' culture as opposed to a 'guilt' one. 'Guilt cultures' (essentially those societies influenced by Semitic religions) in Benedict's reading, are manifested in individuals whose actions are measured against their own specific conscience, against their personal relationship with God. However, I would disagree with this binary opposition since the degree of shame can be so powerful that it is hardly separable from guilt. And, in any event, guilt can be equally experienced within this cosmological scenario, evidenced, for example, by the number of suicides committed in Japan because of the intense guilt (and shame" or are they so closely aligned as to be separated only by sophistry?) felt by those who feel they have 'sinned' against the tenets – sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary – of the society. The 'situational ethic' does not preclude guilt as a human response.

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Religion would not disappear from peoples' lives. It would be resurrected in Art. Be it Noh and Kabuki<sup>65</sup> drama, the tea ceremony, landscape art or scroll paintings and so forth, the traditional arts reflect this confluence of religious traditions and ideals.<sup>66</sup> Donald Keene, interpreting the writings of Kenko (a Shinto and Buddhist priest cum poet of the 14th century), demonstrates this religious influence or more precisely 're-versioning' of religious principles and practices into traditional Japanese aesthetic values and artistic practice. He specifies four qualities that can be said to characterize Japanese ideals of beauty: Suggestion, Irregularity, Simplicity and Perishability.

Suggestion evokes John Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn." Kenko writes:

In all things, it is the beginnings and ends that are interesting. Does the love between men and women refer only to the moments when they are in each other's arms? The man who grieves over a love affair broken off before it was fulfilled, who bewails empty vows, who spends long autumn nights alone, who lets his thoughts wander to distant skies, who yearns for the past in a dilapidated house - such a dawn after we have long waited for it moves us more profoundly than the full moon shining cloudless over a thousand leagues. And how incomparably lovely is the moon, almost greenish in its light, when seen through the tops of the stars deep in the mountains, or when it hides for a moment behind clustering clouds during a sudden shower! The sparkle on hickory or white-oak leaves

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<sup>64</sup> All three religions may equally be characterized as representing merely an ethical system. Even Buddhism, the most celebrated religion of the three is often noted as being 'God-less;' that is, the idea of God in certain sects of Buddhism is considered optional.

<sup>65</sup> Kabuki drama is interesting in this regard, given its bawdy beginnings as a satiric theatre performed by female prostitutes in a dry riverbed near Kyoto. After a number of confrontations with the authorities, and several bans and decrees that reshaped who could perform and what subject matter was proscribed, etc., Kabuki eventually emerged as a type of operatic theatre, religiously devoted to performing certain recognized classics. There is not enough space here to relate the history of Kabuki, but the taming of its radical potential, the endless performance of select texts and the 'religious' pressure on its performers to stay true to a particular tradition or interpretation, speak to the importance of process over product. I mention this because when I speak of "art" in Japan, it is as much about the practice of art as it is about the 'object' in view.

<sup>66</sup> Donald Keene, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Keene's observations are not specific to literature but more general in their emphasis on the "ideals of beauty" in Japan. As such, they reflect the influence of religion throughout the arts.

seemingly wet with moonlight strikes into the heart.<sup>67</sup>

This preference for suggestive over the explicit is particularly prevalent in the sparse scroll drawings, but even now this conceptual approach has remained remarkably resilient. It accounts for much of the minimalist, austere and subtle beauty as well as the often vague, impressionistic quality of many Japanese arts and crafts. Philosophically it creates a mood that is meant to suggest the mystery that forever awaits mankind on the outside of understanding, of articulation.

Irregularity as an aesthetic principle is shared throughout much of Asia and considers uniformity or an overly restrictive symmetry a form of death. The openness represented by Irregularity allows the spirit to breathe through the work. It gives life by ushering in the element of chaos, chance into what threatens to be too finished, closed. Simplicity speaks for itself and in Japan is similar to Suggestion in that a minimalist, austere 'look' is valued but is also firmly related to the qualities of naturalness, purity and asceticism – traditionally the qualities expected of a monk.

Haga Koshiro writes that these principles can be subsumed under one term: *wabi*. It is a three-sided dynamic that celebrates simple/unpretentious, imperfect/irregular and austere/stark notions of beauty. For Koshiro, "the *wabi* ideal of beauty sets simple and unpretentious expression above the complex and striking. It abhors excess; it admires restraint. It sees a higher

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<sup>67</sup>*Ibid* p.7.

dimension of beauty in the imperfect than in the flawless."<sup>68</sup> He notes, as well, its religious dimension: "*wabi* means to transform material insufficiency so that one discovers it in a world of spiritual freedom unbounded by material things. It means not being trapped by worldly values but finding a transcendental serenity apart from the world."<sup>69</sup> Of course this can be read in reverse: art seems to relate inversely to the society which tends to be complex, rigid, controlling, all too clearly explicit in its demands on the individual. Thus aesthetics (both as artistic product and sensibility) becomes a manner of contemplating another way of being; or the 'truer' being that percolates beneath the surface. The social function of art then is to provide an escape from the everyday confinements and demands; though, ironically, it serves to allow the structures of the society to remain intact, unchallenged - as tightly binding as ever.

The final quality, Perishability or impermanence is the most refined of all. Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), a westerner who became an enthusiastic promoter of all things Japanese - and whose traditional Japanese house, ironically, still stands as a museum in the middle of Kumamoto City in the south of Japan amidst all manner of high-rises and department stores - wrote in *Kokoro* (1896):

Generally speaking, we construct for endurance, the Japanese for impermanency. Few things for common use are made in Japan with a view to durability. The straw sandals worn out and replaced at each stage of a journey; the robe consisting of a few simple widths loosely stitched together for wearing, and unstitched again for washing; the fresh chopsticks served to each new guest at a hotel; the light *shoji* frames serving at once for windows and walls, and re-papered twice a year; the mattings renewed every autumn, - all these are but random examples of countless small things in daily life that illustrate the

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<sup>68</sup> Haga Koshiro, "The Wabi Aesthetic through the Ages," in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture A Reader*, ed. Nancy G. Hume (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1995), p. 251.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p.246.



national contentment with impermanency.<sup>70</sup>

Whereas Hearn applies the ideal of perishability to everyday objects, it is a veritable mania in traditional aesthetic performances and artistic practices. This highly developed sense of impermanence probably reaches its apotheosis in the annual Cherry Blossom viewing; admired as much for its intrinsic beauty as for the fact that it only blooms for a few days each year before falling from the tree (cherry blossoms are also an often used analogy for the youthful and doomed *Kamikaze* pilots during World War II). But another tradition perhaps illustrates the depth of this preference. Every twenty years, the central Shinto shrine at Ise -- the most important religious shrine in the nation -- is destroyed and re-built to the exact specifications and with equivalent materials. It is a tribute to perishability and, inversely, continuity. The object, indeed all living things, is continuously subject to the round of birthing and dying but what remains is the performance, the fidelity to the traditions that sustain the society and culture. Thus through the arts, the endless demands of time is acknowledged -- with much almost formal sadness -- but out of the dissolution, the emptiness that everything departs into, a feeling of resignation mixed with expectation is engendered.

What is the effect of this transformation of religion into aesthetic practice and national identity? Does it make religion more or less a force in peoples' lives? I am not sure that this question can be comprehensively answered, but undoubtedly the effect is different. The hold on the imagination of aesthetic sensibility can be much more responsive to changing material conditions, to altered historical and economic circumstances. There is not the same investment of

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<sup>70</sup>quoted in Keene, p.18.

self in a shared aesthetic sensibility. However its very ‘weakness’ may be a source of strength since art’s refinement, its vaguely defined attitude, its emotive almost tactile responsiveness can endure against the tide of history in a way that music, for example, could be carried by slaves from Africa to America over hundreds of years. Artistic production and reception, the style of its discourse can outlive the armies of history. Having said this, I do not want to mislead the reader into thinking that these esthetic/aesthetic considerations represent the sole criteria by which Japanese art work is produced or received; rather they do represent a traditional ideal that can be evoked, often for ideological purposes.

Much the same could be said for the shared sense of national identity, evidenced by the growing international calls for ethnic and cultural autonomy in the post-Cold War, New World Order era. I have resisted thus far the urge to enter into much discussion of how the Japanese do not so much think of themselves as a culturally distinctive nation so much as a race – *Nihon no Zoku*, the Japanese tribe. With any discussion of nationalist pride and difference however, it is perhaps inevitable that such feelings would exist; and, of course, be prone to political manipulation. Allegiance to the nation, denuded of any explicit ethical religious sentiment or ideological vision, becomes ultimately something about blood and soil (of course, it often remains this way even when religious influence holds court). Stripped of the polite fantasy of imperial divinity, the formalized trappings of national unity, Nihonism is a sentimental, sometimes harsh, oftentimes passionate expression of shared bloodlines, shared loss and victory. It is a bodily, vulgar, honest (in a way that normal Japanese social discourse is not), human – an all too human cry that we have survived history. Here. In this, our ancestral land the soil is in our blood and our blood is in the soil. This is our space and we are of this space. Yoshino’s comment

that Nihonism celebrates the complex, irrational and contradictory elements of “human beingness” (*ningensei*) against religious dogma or ideological cant, may ultimately be realized in this visceral relationship the Japanese feel to the land and to each other.

It is perhaps here that we can begin to discern some of the social and aesthetic tropes that circulate within Japanese cinematic practices. This is not merely the adaptation of certain stylistic forms -- for example, Kabuki, Noh, scroll painting, *bunraku* puppet theatre, foreign cinema, etc. -- to the formal elements of films, but is part of a larger process of common attitudes toward art and entertainment; a shared sensibility, a cosmological embrace, that is inextricably linked to a sense of national identity.

## CHAPTER TWO: Postmodern *Nihonjinron*

### The End of the Postwar

If the spatial construction of postwar Japanese society attempts to exclude the destabilizing power of time, it still remains haunted by the momentum of history. At the heart of 'old' Japan was the creation myth that established the Emperor as the embodiment of the Japanese race, but in the overwhelming rationalism and *real politik* world of the postwar years, defeated, occupied by seemingly superior barbarians, the structural edifice supporting myth and reality was stressed, perhaps beyond repair. The sacred mirror gazed into by the Emperor once a year in the nation's most auspicious ceremony was developing a crack. In many respects, the *nihonjinron* discourse was really a desperate attempt to reaffirm some semblance of unity to this shattered identity, to develop an enduring prototype of Japan and the Japanese. It was a crisis of representation, or, the representation of a crisis.

Even as *nihonjinron* intellectuals debated the nature of Japanese society by reverting to an argument for Japan's cultural distinctiveness, it was being undermined by the nation's very successful material rebirth. The postwar growth and rehabilitation of Japan to establish it – whether it wanted to be or not – as a “bulwark against communism,” as a capitalist society, with all the trappings of individual autonomy and economic rationalism (but with only the illusion of economic and social justice) was being won. It was not quite the vision of the Meiji reformers, for in its very triumph was a nagging feeling that a bargain had been struck with the devil and payment was due; that in the effort to preserve Japan against the technologically superior Western powers, the Japanese were, for all intent and purposes, becoming Americanized (the

idea of the 'West' tends to be conflated with 'America,' though there were considerable Germanic influences up until the end of the war). The spatial paradigm of displacement, of deference, of accommodation and co-option was slowly imploding. The a-centric structural arrangements bounded by a near cosmological nationalism wore heavy, a mass density that masked its slow decay by frantic activity, the myth and real work of rebuilding the nation. Japan's grand narrative of postwar reconstruction was exhausted by its own success. There was no liberation or fulfillment of the promise of Oriental wholeness. Instead there was only a dying emperor surrounded by ageing, corrupt acolytes: A vibratory stasis. The bubble would burst.

### *Nihonjinron redux*

The earlier portrait of Japanese society transcribed through the filter of *nihonjinron* discourse is better applicable to the first twenty year period of the postwar, when the embrace of and resistance to Westernization was in full mode. In many ways this era seemed like a replay of the Meiji Reformation, but with the recent trauma of the war and occupation casting a pall over the proceedings. The sturdy nationalist structure that the Meiji reformers had constructed around the divinity of the Emperor, to hold up against the additional construction of imported modern technology (in the *Gestell* sense that Heidegger speaks of technology) so as to literally arm the nation against the West no longer held true. Despite the obvious success of its industrialization program and the creation of a parliamentary democracy, Japan's modernization was possessed by an autocratic nationalism that eventually led to imperialist wars, defeat and occupation. The game in the early postwar was to accomplish some of the same goals, but in a peaceful, demilitarized *tennô* capitalist manner; it was a game of accommodation and encirclement. What

had been strictly temporal ('catching up to the West') was now spatial. It was no longer choosing what would be useful and discarding the rest. The new, the foreign, the modern had arrived – in full battle gear – and so it was necessary to find a suitable place for these new arrivals. This strategic enculturation that embraced the principles of economic and technological growth while keeping their inherent political and social influence at bay, held the balance between spatial and temporal dynamics in a productive tension. By the mid 1980s,<sup>71</sup> however, this model could no longer suppress or contain the sociopolitical desire for change. The structural relationship between space and time would necessarily respond. Japan would be re-invented as a postmodern nation.

What signalled this change were not only the death of Emperor Hirohito (and thus the end of the Shōwa Era) in 1989 and the emergence of Japan as an economic superpower; but also the bursting of the 'bubble' economy that saw over-inflated real estate prices dramatically fall.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, at the pinnacle of economic superpower status, uncertainty and recession loomed. An era of political confusion began that has not abated to this day. Conversely, Japan was no longer

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<sup>71</sup> I have elided the great political and ideological battles that characterized Japanese history in the 1960s, but David Desser's *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988) provides an interesting perspective on the work of filmmakers ideologically committed to reinventing society and cinema.

<sup>72</sup> By 1990, the story floated around Tokyo was that the real estate in a square mile block in the heart of the ritzy financial district was worth more than all of Canada.

The effect of the real estate crash was that in 1993, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party was briefly replaced by a Socialist coalition. Rather than inaugurate any real change, however, its Prime Minister, argues Gluck, "renounced nearly every hallowed socialist position, most of them held for decades against the conservatives." (Gluck, 1997. p.19) The LDP would soon return to power, but this political event revealed something paradoxical about contemporary Japan: the system was opening up at the same moment the choices were being limited. On the one hand, any true socialist alternative – usually representative of the more progressive, democratic-minded forces in the country – was not a viable political option. On the other, the LDP, for all its corrupt practices, elitist self-interest, chummy exclusivity and painfully slow adaptation to changing political realities, was more broadly representative of the Japanese populace than anyone would want to acknowledge. Indeed, the reform elements

on the receiving end of technological expertise but itself on the cutting edge, an exporter economically infiltrating other nations. In particular, audio and video machines, televisions and computers, the whole panoply of communications technologies were being manufactured and being used by Japanese people. The new buzzword in Japan for the transformation of itself to face the new realities was “internationalization” (*kokusaika* – a consciously elaborated program to expose Japanese people to foreigners through the import of English language teachers and the promotion of overseas trips and cultural exchanges).<sup>73</sup> As it was, the international environment had changed: The end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the overthrow of Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe began to rapidly lead to attacks on the concept of nation itself. Aronson argues, in reference to these events that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Japan as an economic superpower mark “the most significant restructuring of the global balance of power since the end of World War II. On the other hand, it is now increasingly recognized that the rivalry between Japan and the United States is not simply a matter of competition between the two strongest capitalist economies; over and above this, it represents a conflict between two particularly

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within the LDP would be more important than any minority party.

<sup>73</sup> This, incidentally, is how I got to Japan. As a teacher in several Junior High Schools in a small city in the south, I was a living, breathing representative of English language and culture. A Stranger in a Strange Land, spouting the Education Ministry’s approved English phrases from textbooks designed to teach grammar and vocabulary, but not language. My very presence was to ‘*kokusaika*’ (internationalize) the Japanese (at least, that’s how some of my colleagues used to like to say it). However, in time, it became apparent that the effect was more to inoculate the Japanese against the stranger/other than ‘internationalize’ them. Our very presence became the object of study; the inverse procedure in Meiji times had been Japanese going overseas to learn about foreign cultures, now they could afford to bring in the fleshy incarnations of all that pop culture *shlock* that was entering the country anyhow. It’s difficult to ascertain the effect of this program. Some of us ‘teachers’ adopted Japanese ways and some Japanese returned the favour. Thus it was not strictly the internationalization of the Japanese, but included a fair measure of the ‘Japanization’ of the foreigners they brought in.

divergent patterns of capitalist development.”<sup>74</sup> Even more significant, Aronson writes, is that because of the configuration of its economic, political and cultural patterns so different from the West, Japan is representative of a ‘counterparadigm of modernity.’ A model marked by the “interpenetration of tradition and modernity.”<sup>75</sup> He identifies the ‘traditional’ with the unifying force of a collective identity (much influenced by Confucianism) and the historical and institutional continuity that can be traced from even before the Meiji period to the present day; this despite the ‘discontinuity’ caused by World War II and the Occupation. The ‘modern,’ on the other hand, is linked to the ‘plurality of traditions,’ illustrated in the past by the Tokugawa acceptance of a number of locally controlled fiefdoms within the overall control of the *Bakufu* administration and the on-going entrance of foreign ideas and influence into Japan. The paradoxical tension created by these opposing forces accounts for the highly transformative ability of the society to accommodate, indeed utilize the new in a productive ‘dialectic of dynamism and containment.’

Rather than posit this blend of tradition and modernity as a version of postmodernity, Aronson – following the path laid down by Castoriadis, Aronson understands modernity as the negation of the models derived from classical antiquity, an essentially open term, and thus suggests postmodernity is an “essentially incoherent concept” because it attempts to go beyond

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<sup>74</sup> Joseph Aronson, “Modernity, Postmodernity and the Japanese Experience,” in *Japanese Encounters with Postmodernity*, Joseph Aronson and Yoshio Sugimoto, eds. (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993). P. 15

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20. Aronson’s discussion of Tokugawa Japan as not being as traditional and feudal as was previously believed is interesting because of a similar pattern that pervades thinking about Japan even now: “The concept of a ‘pseudo-archaic society’ has been used to single out institutional arrangements where the ‘so-called archaic features have been transformed or invented in accordance with a rational goal,’ in this sense, it is tempting to interpret Tokugawa Japan as a pseudo-traditional society – if we bear in mind that the traditional ingredient in a pseudo-traditional mix is real and essential.” P. 20-21.



something that was never a stable, clearly defined concept in the first place – sees the claims for Japanese “postmodernity as merely a mask for resurgent archaism.” In regard to modernity, the more progressive, politically engaged promises of postmodernism revolve around “the rejection of such apparent axioms of modernity as a sovereign subject, a universal reason and an overall direction of history.” But, he points out,

the turn towards pluralism and relativity, as cultural themes or as social forms, is neither as definitive nor as new as the postmodernists would have us believe. The most decisive unifying and globalising mechanisms of the modern world continue to function, and their cultural sources have by no means been exhausted.... the core content is the same: a rationalising process geared to the accumulation of wealth and power. At the same time, the nation-state, with its mechanisms of control and constructions of identity – the historical reality behind modern ideas of society and social system – is clearly getting a new lease on life in some parts of the world and seems capable of adjusting to other trends elsewhere....

For those who would like to analyse the postmodern condition in terms of a de-differentiation of institutions or subsystems (and thus a shift towards more flexible patterns of plurality), the well-known Japanese interpenetration of economics and politics is a suggestive example. The managerial character of Japanese capitalism, its reliance on networks, and its diffuse patterns of authority have been contrasted with Western economies and their dependence on the modern principles of individualism and entrepreneurial initiative. On the political side, the informal power exercised by the bureaucracy, together with the transformation of the imperial institution and the demilitarisation of the state, has led some observers to describe Japan as a polity without a strong visible centre. In brief, the de-differentiating, de-centering and de-subjectivising logic of a society which has nevertheless in some ways outstripped the West suggests at least one possible version of postmodernity in action. But this idea should be handled with care. To begin with the most elementary point: the postmodernists tend to focus on the most visible aspects of cultural representations of power (its *'mise en scène'*, to quote Claude Lefort) and to neglect the more complex mechanisms of its social distribution. One of the most pronounced divisions in the field of Japanese studies is the disagreement between those who treat cultural traditions as an autonomous and decisive factor and those who claim that Japanese history was and is mostly about ‘power’ disguised as culture’ (Karel van Wolferen)... the most decisive innovation [after the War] was a shift from imperial expansion to a long-term project of economic development. The restructuring of Japanese society is thus inseparable from a new response to an environment which is still dominated by the modern – and mutually constitutive – forces of a world market and a global state system. On the other hand, it is at least arguable that the collapse of the imperial project brought some older undercurrents to the surface and

enabled them to take part in the formation of the new order. It has even been suggested that the real result is 'the archaic constellation of a closed harmony which takes on the appearance of postmodernity'.<sup>76</sup>

In this extended quote, Aronson captures the uncertainty and disagreements about what constitutes Japanese postmodernity, or indeed if this is even the relevant term. Within the context of this work however, Japan as a postmodern society could still stand if it is regarded as a structural process that combines the traditional and the modern in a way that does not conflate the two 'opposing' elements, that allows them to stand apart while being locked together in a dynamic tension; but also, in the same spirit of separation, 'encloses' them within a more profound reading of spatial and temporal relations. In this sense, the early postwar decade still has relevance to the current situation, as does the 'principles' of modernity. This is so because postmodernity does not necessarily involve the negation of the modernist socioeconomic order (though it may espouse such notions in its more 'progressive' minded moments); rather it can more fruitfully be defined as including modernity, but differing in its attitude to history (time) and in its more pronounced sensitivity to the 'new' spatial paradigms of the post Cold War era. Postmodernity, for one thing, is the recognition of the non-disappearance of the past; as opposed to modernity which saw in the past only the causal events of history, the past that would have to be overcome to embrace the promise of the new. Postmodernist thought allows the deconstruction of the temporally driven utopianism of modernity, its homogenizing urge and universalizing tendency; and glimpses the possibility of a social and cultural relativism as the product of a changed economically determined environment. However, though the movement

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* P 25-26. Aronson's quote at the end of this passage is from Akira Asada's *Structure and Power*, (Tokyo:

'beyond' modernity may have been instigated by a socially and materially altered landscape, it cannot be understood solely by it. Instead, some attention must be paid to the philosophical basis of any culture or civilization; to what belief system pervades the social structures. For this reason, Aronson's critique of postmodernity as not representing any fundamental alteration in the global marketplace or structures of power can stand as justifiable, but it fails to appreciate the possibility that postmodernity (and modernity, or any other description of the overarching ideological and philosophical basis used for marking a large chunk of history) is not wholly determined by these self same factors. In this way, what Japan may 'mean' to postmodernity is important because the postmodern elements in Japanese history predate the term itself, as well as denuding it of its own utopian pretensions. Furthermore, while the religio-philosophical systems, cultural processes and social structures have been adapted, diluted, waxed and waned in influence over the centuries of Japanese autonomy, they have still remained intact (through the auspices of nationalism); and it is this that may account for the present incarnation of Japan as a postmodern nation.

Before analyzing what is so postmodernist about Japan, it is useful to note, as Ross Mouer and Yoshio Sugimoto do, that it still contained elements of the earlier *nihonjinron* discourse, albeit edged with a greater sense of superiority: "Japan came increasingly during the 1980s to be presented as post-Fordist and postmodernist. During this period, the emphasis on Japan's uniqueness did not wane, but it was recast as being unique in the universal sense that it was out in front leading the pack, that its traditional approaches and values had leapfrogged to

the front, and that it was now the other advanced societies which would converge with Japan.”<sup>77</sup>

But beyond the bravado and popularity<sup>78</sup> of the idea of Japan as a postmodern nation, are some key issues that need exploring. The word itself takes issue with time. Postmodernity connotes a "coming after" or a "going beyond" the triumphalism of the new in modernism. For some, like Lyotard, it expresses a generalized feeling of exhaustion with the progressive promises of the enlightenment project. A project that was to usher in the triumphant march of the individual in a world made better by his presence: The self reigning supremely over the world. Linear time, grand narratives, selfhood as individualism, triumph of the West, science over the sacred, liberation from the past, from God(s), these are the calling cards of modernism. Postmodernism is the morning after this delusion: an awakening to the paradoxical, deceptive nature of the world. Hence the beginning of the acceptance of competing narratives, conflicting positions, cosmologies that cannot be reconciled but must be allowed to continue their 'play.' It suggests chaos, cynicism, paradox, and resignation to the vicissitudes of the world: The recognition that utopian goals of unity and reconciliation cannot be achieved.

Postmodernism also suggests that it is not so much a "coming after" modernism, but a

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<sup>77</sup> Ross Mouer and Yoshio Sugimoto, "*Nihonjinron* at the End of the Twentieth Century: A Multicultural Perspective," in *Japanese Encounters With Postmodernity*, eds. Johann Aronson and Yoshio Sugimoto (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997). P. 262. The authors argue that with the increased economic growth of Japan, more attention began to be paid to the Japanese social 'model' as the cause of this success. A construct that seemed more equitable, socially harmonious, ethically 'Eastern' and fundamentally suited to other emerging East Asian countries. Whereas *nihonjinron* had been (in the early postwar years) a defensive reaction to Western influence, in its 'end of the postwar' phase it was seen as a concrete example of postmodernism in action. However, this postmodernist elevation of the unique (and superior) nature of Japanese 'systems' in comparison to other nations could also be used to investigate whether, internally, Japan was as culturally and socially homogenous as was claimed. Mouer and Sugimoto go on to explore the significance of class, gender and race to suggest a more open model of Japan and the Japanese that would distance itself from the self-serving nationalism – perpetuated by a powerful and educated elite – of the usual *nihonjinron* discourse.

<sup>78</sup> Akira Asada's *Structure and Power*, a post-structuralist critique of Japanese society that investigated

'deepening' of one's understanding of the world; that postmodernism existed before modernism - has, in fact, always existed -- but is only now realized. Thus the past never quite disappears but returns, ever present, ever fateful. (This could be expressed more philosophically as the present being the absorption of both the past and the future; that the moment, here and now, is all there is. Time becomes frozen, in a way, and all that remains is the spatial construction. The awakening to this idea, which I will explore in the next section, can be traced in Western philosophy through to Nietzsche's idea of eternal return but is most prevalent in Zen Buddhism). Because of this loosening of belief in the idea of linear time, of the promises of progress, postmodern 'values' are acceptance and the owning up of the individual to his/her complicity in the very world s/he has tried (or not tried) to alter; that this independent self, ever present and potentially powerful, is a psychotic delusion, an over-determined and unsupported fallacy of presence over absence, reason over feeling, autonomy over interconnection.

Several components of such a postmodernism would appear to ironically reflect the traditional-minded/forward-looking politics of Nihonism. Indeed, Steven Heine comments that this type of postmodernist (he differentiates two types – one that valorizes Japanese social process and one that critiques them) reading suggests “Nihonism and postmodernism [have] become mirror images that reflect and require one another: postmodernism sees Japanese traditions as an incipient form that have been awaiting the apropos time for fulfillment as postmodern paradigms; and traditionalism seeks to legitimate its argument concerning innate adaptability by pointing, for example, to the way *ie-shakai* anticipates postmodern “network

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whether Japan was indeed a postmodern nation, was a big bestseller.

society.”<sup>79</sup> The postmodern critique of modernist temporal assumptions and the over-valuation of individual autonomy also plays into the spatially-biased, de-subjectivized world of Nihonism. Lastly, postmodern notions of a de-centered social system conform to the apparent ‘empty center’ that characterizes the Japanese political and economic practices.

Unfortunately, what it also reveals is the potentially regressive politics of postmodernism. In the embrace of Japan as the postmodern paradigm is another kind of Orientalism. One that valorizes the ‘other’ as the fulfillment of one’s own utopian vision, when in fact it is an authoritarian construct antithetical to what one ostensibly wants to espouse. Eugene Eoyang (1993), John T. Wixted (1989), Bernard Faure (1995), Heine and others call this ‘reverse Orientalism’ and regard it as a counter-productive, politically naive misreading of Japanese society. What is also interesting, however, is that many in Japan – where almost every work about Japan published in a foreign language is quickly translated and disseminated across the land by the *nihonjinron* industry – would also be flattered by this characterization. Quickly embraced, ‘Japan the postmodernist nation,’ with its (Western) academic theoretical sheen praising age-old institutional practices, was a convenient excuse to prop up the tired regime. The effect could be similar to what Dale had earlier argued, that nationalism and the myth of Japanese uniqueness has a cumulative, tautological effect of making people believe in myths at the expense of ‘reality.’ Yet, in accordance with Heine, rather than defend the honor of postmodernist thought and declare Japan ‘non-postmodern,’ it is worthwhile regarding the

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<sup>79</sup> Steven Heine, “*Ie*-ism and the Discourse of Postmodernism,” in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, eds. Charles Wei-Hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). P. 37. *Ie-shakai*, as Heine understands it, is a term that summarizes the nation’s indigenous familial system; a *nihonjinron* idea that the Japanese social system is not only unique, but based on the structure of the family raised to

society as postmodern, warts and all. Primarily because within Japan itself, the end of the postwar era is significantly different – conceptually and materially – from what preceded it. There is a change in attitude, a paradigm shift, a shuffling of the deck that differentiates contemporary Japanese attitudes (from the late-1980s to the present) and self-consciousness from the desperate politics of traditional Nihonism (as reflected in earlier *nihonjinron* discourse): One that is not tied solely to a marked change in the sociopolitical or economic structures. To better grasp this, it is necessary to explore spatial and temporal relations.

## CHAPTER THREE: Space over Time

This work is an entry into *nihonjinron* discourse. By exploring the most fundamental of entities -- time and space -- I am attempting to provide a descriptive framework upon which the quest to formulate a comprehensible (though protean) national identity can be viewed. Spatio-temporal considerations do not so much exhibit a defining (and often prescriptive) urge that Winston Davis complains is the lot of nearly every 'theoretical' treatise on Japanese society, but is a generalized model or philosophical approach registering the ebb and flow of other competing and conflicting discourses. Furthermore, it offers an opportunity to critique much of the preceding *nihonjinron* discourse (often ironically Western-styled and influenced) as generally ending in the assertion of Japanese uniqueness and distinctiveness without any other goal in sight. Such notions of cultural distinctiveness, in fact, mostly contributed to a reactionary nationalism, one desperate to confirm the 'special' nature of the object (Japan and the Japanese) against the tide of change perceived as threatening to engulf its sense of self as a nation.

Though a spatio-temporal approach attempts to avoid the often self-serving idea of Japanese uniqueness, the results of this analysis does still posit a distinctly Oriental perspective at odds with current Western praxis. Japan (as seen in this study) is a particularized expression of a temporal-spatial perspective that shares a philosophical tradition with other historically Buddhist countries -- even as far as India, the birthplace of Buddhism -- but is fundamentally different from the West; though it is, in fact, also constructed through an engagement with the West.

To come to grips with this difference, it is necessary to describe the relationship of



Japanese philosophy and postmodernist thought. The embrace of postmodern ideas in Japan adds to a more nuanced picture of the society at the end of the postwar years because it is more about a change in attitude, in understanding (as opposed to a marked difference in actual social or economic practices). From a spatial theory viewpoint – pragmatically speaking – it is important to understand the relationship of this altered perspective to the reigning socioeconomic order, and less about whether it is a comprehensive description of that order. For what is remarkable is the extent to which Japanese postmodernism (as a philosophical ‘system’ and as a viable, but not totally apt representation of the structural make-up of the society) seemingly replays some of the same patterns that characterized earlier spatial-temporal relations.

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In what for centuries were considered the high art forms – Noh drama, poetry, painting – the blank space is what the subject/object interacts with, what brings the object into its ‘suchness.’ *Bâsho* – a term both spatial and temporal, suggests a stillness, a gap, a place, an emptiness, a pause, an eternity – is what creates an oscillating tension that evokes the most profound aesthetic satisfaction and pleasure. As many other critics have observed, however, this is not purely an aesthetic experience, but a trope that permeates the metaphysical, social and political forms of the society. It is not passive – though it favors a contemplative attitude – but a dynamic that gives shape and character to what is considered Japanese. As such, it is space that produces its manifestations. Not the other way round. This is contrary to what Lefebvre, Foucault and other Western theorists have articulated in spatial theory. Indeed, the Japanese concept sees ‘The Production of Space’ as not the material and epistemological conditions producing space, but an opposite movement: space produces the world that is encountered. It

should therefore be read as *The Produce of Space*. As such, the metaphysical dimension in thinking about space has not been abandoned. Though this sophisticated, malleable and religiously influenced understanding resembles contemporary ideas about space as a social process, the differences are significant. Indeed, it harks back to the debate between idealism and materialism in Western philosophical discourse in that it is a metaphysical understanding – an understanding of Being/non-Being – that is the basis for the identifiable expressions, the ‘material’ evidence of the world. But here, it is further upended by the assertion that this central ‘Being’ is not something recognizable, not specifically God, not some-thing susceptible to the rigors and binary constructs of language, but is an emptiness, a blank space, a temporal and spatial elision, an absence that not only haunts presence but is the possibility of presence. Emptiness is what cannot be expressed and thus the core of expression, its birthplace, the eye of the hurricane.

Whereas Western philosophical practice works from the ‘given,’ the materiality of what is at hand toward an understanding of the deeper codes, systems and truths that may be revealed, toward something that is the organizing principle, the meaning (or more recently, the lack thereof) that gives shape and substance to what already is, Japanese philosophical analysis begins with the meaninglessness (its emptiness, its unknowable-ness) of what is, and how the world eternally arises from this. It takes as the underlying principle the essential emptiness that ‘creates’ the world that is. For this reason, Derrida and Heidegger are interesting to Japanese thinkers. The deconstruction of any and all fundamental metaphysical underpinnings of the world, of the individual, of presence, jives with their understanding of emptiness. Of what is and is not, what is present and absent concurrently.

How the world arises from this emptiness has remained largely untheorized by Japanese thinkers until the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and what efforts have been recently made are primarily because of their encounter with the West. Through the Kyoto School, the most important Japanese philosophical movement of the twentieth century, the link between Heidegger and Nietzsche and Japanese thinkers such as Keiji Nishitani, Kitaro Nishida and Masao Abe among others, was firmly established. Their engagement with Western philosophy was to produce a body of work that drew on Zen-influenced aesthetics, and a wider range of Buddhist philosophy, and would then be linked in terms of methodology to the work of Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness* and Nishida's *A Study of the Good* are the seminal works that explicate a particularly Japanese understanding of these ontological concerns.

The actual recognition of this profound emptiness, the dynamic power of space, happens in reverse to how it functions -- from the individual object/subject toward the universal metaphysic. It is a spiritual understanding, highly influenced by Zen, that seeks an enlightenment, an acceptance, an understanding that initially transcends what is, but is firmly grounded in, or returns to, the real, the suchness of the world. In psychological terms, it is to enter the looking glass that Lacan would argue is a primal condition that cannot be broached, no matter how much we wish it. The Oriental reply is to accept the separation, but to live in recognition that we are products of this fundamental unity, this totality and to hold out the promise that it can be reclaimed. It has -- according to its practitioners -- been reclaimed by some mystics and Zen masters, the ones who have created the great *koans*, and whose sayings permeate the religious literature of Japan. In particular, is the famous comment by a Zen monk that 'before I practiced Zen, mountains were mountains, rivers were rivers. During practice,

mountains were no longer mountains, rivers no longer rivers. When I gained enlightenment, mountains were once again mountains, rivers rivers.' This is the Oriental promise of enlightenment: a return to the suchness of things, not a transcendence or a 'transcendence' (to use Nishitani's term) into an elemental source or form or idea, but a return to the world as it is.

In this promise, as per usual, is a deferment. But it is precisely here that actual society can be encountered. In this reaching for a totality that is supported by an existential nothingness – a necessarily untheorized lacuna that is yet all important to the whole cosmological/metaphysical foundation of the society, to how spatial relations are organized, how temporal lines are played out, how history unfolds and purpose directed – a whole society has arisen, bolstered by its strength as a vision, and its weakness. Japanese society may not be so much a product of this metaphysic, but a byproduct: A testament to the failure of this vision to be carried through or an all too human construction around it.

Japan, then, is not the fulfillment of the Oriental vision of enlightenment. Rather it may be better characterized as the structures built up around this fundamentally unstructured idea. Because of this paradoxical nothingness at the center of every-thing, traditional agglomerations of power could maintain their supremacy. There is no eschatological insight that would threaten the social foundations, only a seemingly passive ideal that is pragmatically endorsed, but effectively bordered and transgressed. Despite the wisdom and subtlety of this largely Buddhist-inspired longing for oneness, its abstract nature allowed (Davis calls it "passive enablement") other more pressing ideologically formulations to supercede the desire for personal enlightenment. This indefinable void could be filled with all manner of projections. But principally, it seems, is the vision of the Japanese as a race apart, distinct, unique. Thus whatever

it may garner from the outside (and much of its past growth, even preceding the Meiji Restoration and the Occupation, has been indebted to others – China, Korea, Indian religious philosophy -- is ultimately animated by the fabled Japanese Spirit, a bloodline directed down from the heavens through its emperors into the bones of its people and the soil beneath their feet.

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If this appears somewhat abstract, I hope to ground these ideas by showing that spatio-temporal considerations -- a key aspect of the distinctiveness of Japanese aesthetics and sensibility -- are elemental to an evaluation of the films and informative about the part played by cinema in the re-building of postwar Japan. In fact, not only cinema, but as a useful way to evoke a deeper cultural and anthropological understanding of the whole society that can remain sensitive to historical and material changes without necessarily positing them as the sole determining factors of what constitutes the society.

Central to my thesis is the idea that space is valued over time. That, in fact, time -- often incarnated as the new, the outside influence, history, language, even logic and change itself -- is spatialized. Time serves space, gives into it in the hierarchy of values, and plays a secondary role to space in the articulation and understanding of cultural and national identity. How time is occupied by space or how time is compartmentalized within space is key to understanding the differences between Japan and the West. And this spatialization (of time) is crucial in re-constructing the Japanese sense of self in the face of the psychical shock of the defeat, subsequent occupation and the rapid pace of change since the war, because it provided for the continuity of traditions and established structural patterns while still accommodating the

exigencies of time. Space, that physical nothingness, that social plenitude was replenished. Thus, out of the blinding atomic light, the emptiness exploded into the 'new' Japan -- a being that was always there, awaiting (re-) birth.

Time is seen as impermanent or permanently changing, unreliable. Space though is ultimately mysterious, empty. Time is merely a temporary arrangement of elements within this nothingness. Space, however, is elemental; the site of nation for it is subtly associated with what is 'truly' Japanese. It remains unspoken and Western attempts to 'speak' Japanese cinema become enmeshed in a Heideggerean game of hide and seek with this elusive, silent force.

It is my contention that the Japanese were able to cope with the profound effects of change by relegating each new component to a particular place within the society. Instead of change altering the fundamental nature of the nation, it found a place within the ever-crowded bento box (a traditional serving box with sections for different foods, common in Japanese lunches) of Japanese society. In fact, it resembles Foucault's "heterotopia" in that any number of disparate ideas or cultures could find a 'suitable' place within the 'mainstream.' But unlike Foucault's concept, there was no equivalence or contrariness of the elements; rather, this multiplicity allowed the historic hierarchy, the age-old structures of the society to remain in place. Instead of being an articulation of utopian goals or a progressive ideology, the spatialization of time permitted the culture to embrace change while remaining intact; essentially by defusing its impact, taming its potential disruption of broadly accepted social behaviors. It was, in this respect, a bulwark against the ravages of time.

As such, this spatiality would suggest that Japanese society is traditional and modern (and hence postmodern?) in its make-up. The impact of Heidegger and Derrida on Japanese

intellectuals, as well as the interest of Western intellectuals like Barthes and Ihab Hassan<sup>80</sup> in Japan, serves to underline this postmodern appearance. But if true, it is a particularly Japanese form of postmodernism: One that emerges from a blend of Oriental philosophies before seeking confirmation in the (Occidental) Other.

To return to the earlier problematic, what does 'Japanese postmodernist thought' say about Japan or, inversely, what does this 'postmodernist nation' reveal about Japanese thinking in the 'end of postwar' era? Or, to put it more simply, what does this say about postmodernism and Japan?

Japan, thus configured, is unique, as are all nations. It is a national entity shot through with all manner of foreign influence, a hybrid whose hybridization remains particular to itself. Modern Japan, the Japan instigated by the Meiji reforms of the nineteenth century, experienced, perhaps more than any other nation, a movement from 'late feudalism' to 'industrialized liberalism' to 'fascist and imperialist power' to 'occupied territory' to 'post-industrial democracy.' The trauma and benefits experienced under these labels include the massive overhaul of the insular social structure of the Tokugawa period, the blood, sweat and tears of re-fashioning the nation, the cruelties of its army during its invasion and occupation of other Southeast Asian countries, the loss of life during the war and from the two atomic and thousands of conventional bombs dropped on its cities, the subsequent surrender and occupation, then the rapid rebuilding of its economies and social structures in the postwar era. Forgive such a glib

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<sup>80</sup>Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, original copyright in French, 1970) and Ihab Hassan, *Between the Eagle and the Sun* (Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 1996) are works on Japan to which I will return. For now, it is interesting to note that they -- in particular, Barthes' slim volume -- spurred on the debate about Japan as a postmodern nation.

listing of events, but they will help underscore a point about the often defamed nationalism or Nihonism that remained a powerful force throughout the hundred plus years of this period: without a strong sense of itself as a nation, as even a 'unique' nation, destined to survive the homogenizing or sometimes more psychically brutal imperialism of Western powers, Japan could not have physically or psychically survived this turbulent period of historical change. This sense of self was naturally tied to the past, to the temporal duration of peoples shared history within the confines of a singular place, Japan. What arrogance and forgetting would be necessary to maintain this illusion of independence (and the consequent sense of uniqueness and superiority), as a race apart, was dependent on the focusing of cultural and familial ties that bound the Japanese temporally and spatially within its own 'imagined community.' The transformative ability to adapt the new to themselves, and vice versa, could be subsumed under the demands of nationalism. The overriding force of such nationalism cannot be explained solely in materialist philosophical terms. It must surely be a profound and cosmological conception of being in the world to have exerted such on-going power upon the individual(s) over such a long period of history. That cosmology would begin with nothingness, an absence that nevertheless accounts for presence -- a seemingly paradoxical statement that posits time as eternal -- and thus everything exists simultaneously, not in a linear progression. Things do not come into being but are always there/not there. Every-thing is an appearance/disappearance, a presence haunted by the 'absence' of nothingness and an absence that is the 'presence' of nothingness. In this formulation is a profound acceptance of every-thing for it is no-thing. The ontology of this religious coming to terms with existence, this paradoxical suchness, permits what is to play itself out. It gives teleological license, if you will, to a ruling clique to 'activate' its ideological



potential, to bend its formlessness into an instrument of power and control. It is a 'system' of "weak thought," as Vattimo could describe it, that does not merely parasitically feed off the structures that be, but is, in fact, the host, the unacknowledged ground upon which the nation stands. The deconstructive power of no-thingness de-centers, de-subjectivizes, and strips thoughts of temporal destiny. Thus the appropriation of religion proper, the fetishizing of aesthetic forms, the stasis of certain social structures, in particular the family, so service to the ideals of the nation could be accomplished; even if there is nothing explicit in this cosmological vision to warrant such activities.

The postmodern turn would only serve to deepen this conception by bringing it to the surface. Particularly in its post-structuralist form, postmodernism mimics the insight of Zen-influenced philosophy. Its enthusiastic embrace by the well-read segment of the Japanese populace reflects not only a smug reassurance in regard to the sophistication of *their* 'system,' but also suggests a certain degree of *sangfroid* within Japanese society in regard to its past and its present. Is it just coincidence that postmodernism 'comes' to Japan at the end of the postwar? Or does it represent a certain peace with its wartime past and the schizophrenic postwar era of reconstruction (or 'restoration')? Whereas early postwar *nihonjinron* writings reflected this schizophrenia of embrace/rejection of the old/new, indigenous/other, contemporary *nihonjinron* literature resolves these schizophrenic doubts by understanding the deeper tropes, motifs, cosmologies that underlie Japanese society as perhaps providing a paradigm for how other nations can negotiate the 'New World Order.' It remains to be seen if it would be used to deconstruct it.

If postmodernism reveals something of value about Japan, the favour is returned. Steven

Connor, quoting John Rajchman, notes that in “its elasticity and theoretical centrelessness, postmodern theory ‘is like the Toyota of thought: produced and assembled in several different places and then sold everywhere.’”<sup>81</sup> More seriously, Connor charges that postmodernism is

a theory which itself continually projects the categories of its own discomfiture, in a will-to-undoing which goes beyond (while also recapitulating) anything in Dadaism or surrealism. Here, will and surrender, mastery and renunciation spiral together in an indissoluble helix which is itself another version of the set towards the sublime. Such a theory asserts its legitimacy through the forms of its discrediting, unmakes and decentres itself only to produce suppler forms of authoritative discourse.<sup>82</sup>

Postmodernism invites self-deconstruction. If it ‘means’ the end of our affair with meta-narratives and the championing of the fragmentary, the situational, the particular, the ragged debris either displaced by the forces of modernism or left over from the implosion of this ruling narrative, then it can never be *one* thing. Under its own terms, it is indefinable, under erasure, present and absent. Like the Zen-inspired philosophy of the Kyoto School, postmodern thought posits an empty center that is as susceptible to varying political interpretations. In the context of Japan, one can further argue that in its incomplete description of contemporary reality – as decentred, while being blind to the implacable, unifying forces of authoritarian and globalizing capitalism – postmodern theory is inadvertently supporting what it is denying. And thus like the nothingness that helps to create the conditions for a continued Nihonism in Japanese society and politics, postmodernism props up that which it seeks to deconstruct.

Temporally, such self-immolation (something usually only performed by impassioned

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<sup>81</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19

Buddhist monks and humanities professors) takes issue with the durational, Hegelian logic of linear time as unfolding in a progressive clash of thesis/antithesis, an eschatology that draws us toward a Marxist or Religious paradise.<sup>83</sup> Postmodernism negates this temporal destiny and, rather inadequately thus far, draws on Nietzsche's sparse references to 'eternal return,' as a way of recognizing the discontinuous yet contemporaneous nature of time. (There's enough bad physics in humanities discourse, so let's just say this is a spatialized reading of time). The crucial result of time being 'de-linearized' is a profound questioning of the autonomy of the individual self.<sup>84</sup> The internal causality that supports being -- a being in time -- is fractured so that being is contingent, relational to other beings and systems outside itself. The self is no longer impermeable, a particle moving through Newtonian space, but equally a wave, a light form penetrable, without substance... no-thing in particular.

The effect of this spatio-temporal distortion in the modernist conception of being, the relentless (I'm thinking of Derrida) exposure of the textual promise of Being and presence, has been the opening up of the 'closed' discourse of modernism to all manner of 'fringe' players who espouse post-feminism, post-colonialism and so forth in an attempt to untangle themselves from the crumbling edifice of modernist (and presumably structuralist) thought. Against this disappearing mainstream, they are forced to construct their identities in relation to each other, constantly having to other the other in a seemingly endless, nihilistic game. But there is no

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<sup>83</sup> I want to say a 'Capitalist paradise' as well for is this not a capitalist paradise we live in now? Here at 'the end of history,' where both religious and Marxist goals have been skewered, a global capitalism that has always resisted utopian fantasies is, however, working out its own destiny.

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche uses "eternal return" to formulate an emphasis on the human as opposed to God-centered relevance of moral action; to 'place' man at the center of his own universe. However, in the Japanese context (primarily through the work of Nishitani that I will explore in more depth later) and in postmodern thought, this

comfort in this endless text -- this (clinically coined) 'de-subjectified' self that lacks any sense of historical destiny. There is the need for something solid. Some presence. Thus Japan is an enticement: the word made real, the idea made flesh. But it also exposes the political naiveté often characteristic of postmodern thought. In the postmodern apple still turns the worm of modernism. If Japan is indeed a postmodern country, then postmodernism is an open political text, susceptible to regressive, authoritarian systems and rampant capitalist practices. Postmodernism handcuffs itself, thereby allowing the still energetic forces of imperialism (in its economic and military forms) to have their way.

The Japan-as-postmodern perspective, first inaugurated in Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* and extended through the links between the writings of Jacques Derrida, Japanese aesthetic principles and religious thought, is all about space and time. Derrida's work, in particular, attracted the attention of Japanese and comparative religion scholars because of what they saw as its intimate relationship to Japanese thought and society. Through the work of Akira Asada (*Structure and Power*, 1983) and Kôjin Karatani (*The Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, 1980), both bestsellers in Japan (the popularity of Asada's version of postmodernism was such that it was referred to as the "AA phenomenon" by the press), interest in his writings culminated in Derrida's grand tour of Japan in 1984. In Asada and Karatani's meeting with Derrida, Steven Odin reports that Karatani argued "that since Japan has no fixed structures, deconstruction as such is not possible. By this view, deconstruction has already taken place in Japan, insofar as Japan has already arrived at a radically decentered or multicentered reality in which God, the

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focus on the primacy of the self is not nearly so endorsed.

ego, and all other fixed metaphysical centers have been displaced through a differential logic.”<sup>85</sup>

Derrida, in a radio interview, famously cast doubt on the supposedly decentered society, but this did not seem to dull the effect. Something in his post-structuralist writings resonated with the Japanese sense of themselves and their experiences within their society.<sup>86</sup>

Derrida’s concept of *différance* – the endless difference/deferral of the sign that prevents conceptual closure or any reduction to an ultimate meaning – deconstructs the ‘transcendental signified,’ wherein each sign empties out into an endless network of relationships. Thus Derrida perpetually (it seems) “decenters” every sign to show its lack of a “center;” it is the “abandonment of all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or an absolute archia.”<sup>87</sup> Hailing Nietzsche and Heidegger as precursors of this decentering project, Derrida’s deconstructions expose the onto-theological discourse of Western metaphysics that asserts God as Absolute Being, Presence or Identity everywhere in the text; as he does any other

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<sup>85</sup> Steve Odin, “Derrida and the Decentered Universe of Ch’an/Zen Buddhism,” in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, eds. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Derrida said:

“I wonder if deconstruction is truly so easy in Japan. I have my doubts about whether we can say deconstruction is a direct element in Japanese-type thought. Certainly, Japanese often say that Buddhist thought or the Zen of Dôgen was already a kind of deconstruction, but I wonder if that is so. If that were really so, then why, for example, had Asada’s book received such tremendous attention? If that phenomenon of Asada were nothing more than a repetition of deconstructive elements already found within Japanese thought, then it shouldn’t have called down such an enormous response in contemporary Japan.” (*Ibid.* P.4). Derrida’s comment still rings true for Japan is hardly the postmodern country it may like to think itself. For one thing, and this criticism will relate to Barthes’ analysis later on, is that Japan is not solely a nation representative of Zen traditions (Nihonism or Japanese nationalism may be able to better lay a claim to this title). As well, Derridean post-structuralism begins to diverge from Zen and Mahayana Buddhist traditions principally over the question of the importance of language, a key element in Derrida’s thought. In any event, it is also interesting that Derrida never really follows up the possibilities of a linkage between deconstructionism and Japanese Buddhism in his own writings, which suggests the whole enterprise to be fruitless or even offensive to his project.

<sup>87</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University Press, 1978), p. 286.

'centering.' No-thing remains, so to speak, other than an interplay of identity and difference that must always be 'under erasure,' a *trace* that is both present and absent. Coward (along with Robert Magliola (1990), Steven Odin (1995), Richard Pilgrim (1995) and others, to whom I am indebted for better articulating the relationship between Derridean and Japanese thought) makes explicit the connection to Buddhist philosophy:

In agreement with Buddhism, Derrida establishes the movement of difference as fundamental... Every moment of experience is radically different from all other moments that are constantly arising in the stream of consciousness... For Derrida even the most basic irreducible state that he calls arche-writing or trace is composed of the movement of difference and contains within its potentiality for all oral and written language. This intrinsic *différance*, says Derrida, permits the articulation of speech and writing and founds the opposition between signifier and signified. *Différance* is therefore the formation of form and the being imprinted of the imprint. It is all a dynamic movement that has no originary subsisting trace (such as the *logos* notion implies). The trace is simply the basic impulse for movement that composes consciousness and that as part of its own movement, erases itself. Here Derrida's thinking has much in common with the Buddhist notion of our experience as a stream of consciousness that leaves behind no enduring trace of its passing.<sup>88</sup>

Odin further concludes that "it is held by many scholars that deconstruction is already a basic element in Japanese thought, especially Zen Buddhism. Indeed, some scholars have argued that the nonsubstantialist and uncentered world view of Mahayana Buddhism in general and radically acentric Zen Buddhism in particular can best be interpreted through Derrida's postmodern vision of a dislocated reality devoid of all fixed centers."<sup>89</sup> In *Derrida on the Mend*, Magliola enthusiastically embraces Derrida's *différance* as being a culturally different expression of what the ancient Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna calls *sunyata* (devoidness of being or self-

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<sup>88</sup> Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy*, p. 137-8.

<sup>89</sup> Steve Odin, "Derrida and the Decentered Universe," in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*,

existence). For Magliola, both terms represent “the absolute negation which absolutely deconstitutes but which constitutes directional trace.”<sup>90</sup>

There would be the usual finer points of the argument that are taken up by Harold Coward and David Loy (*Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*) that revolve around the issue of whether language apprehended by Nagarjuna or Derrida better engages with reality. Buddhism usually valorizes silence and experience over language in the quest for the real; thus this remains the fundamental divide that separates Derridean from Buddhist philosophy.<sup>91</sup>

But the primary focus amongst Japanese thinkers (and their Western counterparts, mostly in the fields of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Anthropology) is that postmodernism, particularly its post-structuralist strain, has valid links with the Zen philosophy that predated it. And even if it were not an absolutely true representation of contemporary Japan or Japanese thought, the mere similarity or congruence of ideas elevated the nation to a pinnacle that its economic “miracle” only underlined. For the deeper historical and philosophical links between postmodernism and recent Japanese philosophy (as opposed to ancient commentators like the Indian Nagarjuna), it is necessary to go to the Kyoto School, whose major figures – Kitaro

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eds. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1984), p. 89.

<sup>91</sup> Coward writes: “For Buddhism, and Nāgājuna in particular, language (including scripture) expresses merely imaginary constructions (*vikalpa*) that play over the surface of the real without giving us access to it. Derrida, however, sees the dynamic difference that characterizes reality as also composing the nature of language itself. This enables language through its inherent processes of difference to function as a means of realization. For Derrida language participates in the reality it manifests.” (Coward, p. 135). Coward takes Derrida’s side in this ‘argument’ by criticizing Nagarjuna’s position as too one-sided and thus not in the spirit of the “middle way.” Thus, ironically, Derrida becomes more Buddhist than Nagarjuna! However, David Loy comes to Nagarjuna’s defense by arguing that *sunyata*’s, “emptiness, the relativity of all things, is itself relative; the ultimate truth, like the conventional, is devoid of independent being.” In this way, “if there is no subject-object separation between language and object, between signifier and signified, then all phenomena, including words, are *tathata*, “thusness.”” (quoted in Coward, 145). Therefore, language cannot be excluded from reality as everything ‘belongs’ to the real;

Nishida, Keiji Nishitani and Masao Abe – had, like Derrida, and since the beginning of the twentieth century, engaged with the work of Heidegger and Nietzsche.

It is a direct connection A student of first Nishida and then Heidegger, Nishitani later studied in Paris in the 1930s and, the story goes, was the first person to hand Jean-Paul Sartre a copy of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. However, it is Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945), a life long practitioner of Zen meditation, who first posited in his "logic of the East" that all things, including God and the self "are" and "are not." Odin and Dilworth argue that Nishida's "self-identity of absolute contradictions" has "a deep structural proximity to Derrida's logic of *différance* wherein all self-identity is constituted by a play of irreducible differences."<sup>92</sup> Be that as it may, Nishida and those who followed in his path at the Kyoto School, would allow this abstract rendering of the nature of reality to become entangled in the thorny field of politics and national identity. The course of this transmutation is instructive as to what awaits the relationship of postmodernism to Japan. To pursue the trajectory of Japanese religious philosophy and its ideological impact, attention must be paid to the work of the Kyoto School. It is an important aspect of the *nihonjinron* that supports the current ideas of this discourse.

Two intermingled ideas are at work here: an ontological base that recognizes the "nothingness" of all that is (a paradoxical enough statement considering that the point is that no base exists, or is entirely present), and an epistemology of time-space that posits what is as a trace of this "nothingness." While this Zen metaphysic asserts an essential emptiness as the 'ground' of Being, it has been, in this century, re-articulated through Western philosophy by the

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as does silence, dreams, action, instinct, etc.

<sup>92</sup> Odin, p. 6.



Kyoto School. However, it is my contention (shared to varying degrees by Steven Heine, Bernard Faure and Tatsuo Arima) that in the 'space' evacuated by this abstract deconstruction of Being, is an assertion of value and meaning through the epistemologies of nationalism. It is not simply a political, statist nationalism, but deeply rooted in the culture and social and historical structures of the society. Therefore, it is not so much a politically expedient nationalism, but one that is rooted in a sense of self: self as an individual and as a nation, the Japanese sense of themselves as a tribe. What holds this (personal/public) self intact against the vicissitudes of fate – of historical and temporal flux, the intrusion of the Other into manicured grounds of the nation – is a spatial arrangement, the division of each 'new' element into its own place. Thus the progression, power and knowledge of time can be accommodated, can redecorate the rooms, but cannot tear apart the structural supports or general design of the edifice.

### **Postmodern Japan/Japanese Postmodernism**

The double movement described above is similar to the privileging of culture in *nihonjinron* literature, which seeks to comprehend Japanese society beyond strictly materialist and historical rationalizations. Setting aside its shortcomings in this regard for now, however, it is worth exploring the strength of this reading for what it reveals about postmodern discourse in the context of Japan, and for what it brings to the table in contributing to a more comprehensive portrait of the society.

Nishida's publication in 1911 of *An Inquiry into the Good*, was a seminal moment in modern Japanese thought for he initiated a more stringent, logically-argued (as opposed to solely intuitive) philosophical engagement with Zen while forging its links with Western ideas. It is for

this reason that he is considered Japan's first philosopher, in the Western sense of the word. Yet the basic point that Nishida makes is no different than what earlier Zen monks stated about the nature of reality. Indeed, in Nishida's characterization of his own project – "beneath the foundation of Oriental culture... there is something that sees the form in the formless and hears the sound of the soundless. Our hearts cannot help longing for such experiences. I intend to give a philosophical basis to such longings." – one can discern the voice of several Zen patriarchs. What Nishida was seeking in his meditations and in his philosophy was "pure experience," an unmediated encounter with the self and the world. As Arima puts it:

In *mu* (nothingness), according to Nishida, all dichotomies are united in the higher unity of consciousness – the category of pure experience. Pure experience precedes the existence of the individual. Hence Nishida's famous statement: "The individual does not precede the experience. Rather it is the experience that defines the individual." Elsewhere, commenting on T.H. Green, whose influence he often revealed, Nishida remarked: "In individual idealism there is the tendency to think of experience as determined by the individual. Yet should we consider the individual personality so fundamental? ... In the moment of pure experience there is neither the self (subject) nor the others (objects). There is only One experience." Therefore, by the actualization of the self, Nishida means not so much individualized self-perfection as the unfolding of the self into *mu* through the pure experience that gives unity to the individual's consciousness and, at the same time, binds him to the whole.<sup>93</sup>

Nishida's mantle was taken up by Keiji Nishitani (1900-1991), the other towering figure of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese philosophy. No brief summary can do justice to the ideas or influence of his work. However, within the confines of this analysis, it is useful to turn our attention to how Nishitani understands time and space. Nishitani posits a fundamental unity that underlies reality, or as he puts it, a "circuminsessional interpenetration" where every thing is unto itself and at the same time intertwined with every other thing. Yet this unity is not based on some

moment of creation – as in the Judeo-Christian tradition – but on *sūnyata*, the emptiness that forever empties itself (*kenosis*) and from which existence is possible. From this standpoint, history is eternal, without beginning or end. It is neither linear nor circular. It includes everything, God, humanity, nature, and so forth. And every thing carries the mark of eternity, every moment a “monad of eternity” into which the past and future collapse. Thomas Kasulis explains it thus:

Since history from the standpoint of emptiness denies transcendence, the value within the world is self-generated; it is autotelic. But the autotelic character is radically different from the nihilistic view. In nihilism, it is the self that is autotelic; the self imparts meaning to the world at the present moment. In the Buddhist view characterized as emptiness, however, reality as a whole is autotelic. Experientially, we could say the self has dissolved into the emptiness. Ontologically, the self is nothing more than the emptiness’s self-expression. I preach the dharma (thereby giving the world value), but so does every other thing preach the dharma [Buddhist notion of ‘truth,’ the message and ‘way’ of the Buddha] as well. We each preach it fully insofar as we are emptiness’s emptying itself.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the influence of Heidegger and his lengthy engagement with Nietzsche, Nishitani’s vision of *sūnyata* and space-time are fundamentally Buddhist: rationally argued, but equally the product of an intuitive, experiential wisdom. He celebrates the “suchness” of things where every thing “preaches” the dharma and thus every thing is affirmed. Going beyond nihilism – which he argues that Nietzsche establishes as infinite only to the degree that it is bordered by human will, whereas *sūnyata* is “eternal” unbounded by both God or humanity –

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<sup>93</sup> Arima, p. 10.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, “Whence and Whither: Philosophical Reflections on Nishitani’s View of History,” in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji Encounter With Emptiness* (U.S.: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), p. 269.

Nishitani continually asserts that ‘in’ *sūnyata*, everything exists in the “field of Great Affirmation,” the true “home-ground” of the world. The gist of Nishitani’s vision of space and time are contained in his masterwork *Religion and Nothingness* (the Japanese title translates as *What is Religion?*), and it is from this that these extended passages are culled:

### [Space]

On the field of *sūnyata*, the center is everywhere. Each and everything in its nonobjective and “middle” selfness is an absolute center. To that extent, it is impossible for the self on the field of *sūnyata* to be self-centered like the “self” seen as ego or subject. Rather, the absolute negation of that very self-centeredness enables the field of *sūnyata* to open up in the first place.

To the extent that the being of the self is present in the home-ground of all other things, the self is not the self. The self is not a small, self-centered circle. Together with emptiness it is free of all outer limits. It is, so to speak, something with no circumference whatsoever. This is elemental self-awareness....

It is the field in which each and everything – as an absolute center, possessed of an absolutely unique individuality – becomes manifest as it is in itself. To say that each thing is an absolute center means that wherever a thing *is*. The world *worlds*. And this, in turn, means that each thing, by being in its own home-ground is the home-ground of all beings; and, conversely, that in being on the home-ground of all, each is its own home-ground...

To claim, then, that a thing is such as it is, and is really itself, is no different from saying that all things are essentially one with one another and gathered together as the world. This is the “One and All,” not as it is contemplated on the field of reason, but as it is comprehended on the field of *sūnyata*. This is, as noted earlier, not simple “being,” but being at one with emptiness; and, consequently, it is not an absolute unity abstracted from all multiplicity and differentiation in the world, but an absolute unity on the field where multiplicity and differentiation are absolutely radicalized. It means that an All that is nothingness-*sive*-being, being *sive*-nothingness is One; it means that on the field of *sūnyata* all centers, each of which is absolutely independent, are essentially one.

### [Time]

When we become aware of that fact [the truth of *sūnyata*], namely, when we truly *are* in our own home-ground, we stand from one moment of time to the next *outside* of time, even as we rest from one moment to the next bottomlessly *inside* of time. Even as we stand radically, or rather bottomlessly (groundlessly and with nothing to rely on), inside the world, we stand at the same time outside of it. In this case, having nothing to rely on means absolute freedom...

Precisely as the absolute freedom that bottomlessly makes being and time to be being and

time, emptiness is also a knowledge. It is the standpoint of an insight that knows everything in its true suchness. But similar to what we have noted often enough before, this suchness can be spoken of as phantom-like. This knowledge is a “phantom-like Wisdom” ....

On the field of emptiness, all time enters into each moment of time passing from one moment to the next. In this circuminsessional interpenetration of time, or in time itself that only comes about as such an interpenetration, namely, in the *absolute relativity* of time on the field of *sūnyata*, the whole of time is phantom-like, and the whole of the being of things in time is no less phantom-like.

But in spite of this, on the field of *sūnyata*, each time, in its very actuality, is the suchness of this time or that time. We might say, in other words, that because in the field of *sūnyata* each time is bottomlessly in time, all times enter into each time. And only as something bottomless that all times can enter into does each time actually emerge in its manifestation as this or that time, such as it is. This suchness and phantom-likeness must needs [sic] be one. Therein, to be sure, lies the essence of time.

#### [Space-Time]

*That time and place consist of a circuminsessional interpenetration in which all enter into each, in other words, the absolute relativity of time and space, means that all things have their being temporally and spatially; “earth, water, fire, air, oceans and mountains, towns and hamlets,” and the very “halls of heaven” – in short, the “world” – arises in the interpenetration in the being of each and every thing, in the elemental relativity of existence. [my italics]<sup>95</sup>*

To summarize, the “bottom” of time is eternity, an “absolute nothingness,” without beginning or end. Time has no theological beginning and, inversely, is not the eternal return of Nietzsche which grounds time in mankind; rather it returns and progresses, is absent and present, continually erasing itself, constantly in flux. “Absolute nothingness” surrounds and infests everything. It is an eternal becoming, never the arrival of being. Along with the evisceration of time, space too is decentered. Everything is unto itself yet in everything else. What is “real” is

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<sup>95</sup> Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), passages from pp. 158-164. The original Japanese publication was in 1961, though much of the work can be traced back to Nishitani’s work from the mid-1940s on; especially his reading of Nietzsche. Please forgive such an extended series of quotes, but given how much Derrida I have had to read over the years, I felt it important to expose the Western reader to a Japanese philosopher of equal stature; especially since this is a work on Japanese culture.

the emptiness that 'grounds' everything. And all that is, is merely the process of emptiness emptying itself. The 'world' as presence is an expression of absence. In the face of this 'unity,' this 'non-duality,' one can only affirm existence: everything in the world is as it is.

Working from a shared interest in the thought of Heidegger and Nietzsche, Nishitani has arrived at a philosophy that is parallel to Derrida's; that is, similar, but significantly different. Again the central issue is language. Whereas Derrida uses the endless deferment and difference of absolute meaning in language to question the inviolability of presence, of Being, Nishitani – and indeed the Kyoto School and near every onto-theological philosopher of the Buddhist tradition – theorizes from the opposite direction. It is from absence, the "absolute nothingness" on the other side of language and being that "grounds" the real; not as Derrida would have it, where it is the continuous play of language, the fact that everything is within the text.

It is tempting to collapse the two views into one and argue, from a spatial theory perspective that, in practice, they amount to the same thing. Since spatial theory is not about resolving ontological dilemmas, but charting (mapping) the structural course of philosophical 'positions.' It is about how these ideas work within the context of a society and whether they are true representations of the social dynamic within the society. From this standpoint, post-structuralist thought dissolves the ground below our feet, the spatio-temporal certainties of Western theology and the Enlightenment, to initiate a free-play of *différance* in the endless expanse of meaning. Nishitani et al, on the other hand, bring forward into contemporary theoretical discourse the possibility that the world is already an expression of this freedom; but via an 'essential' emptiness. The pragmatic resolution would be to view these as two sides of a coin endlessly flipping, never landing.

If this Japanese 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical tradition – new in that it is constructed from an engagement with modern Western ideas, but old in that it is reflective of over two millennia of Buddhist thought – is representative of contemporary Japan, then, does this make the nation postmodern? Yes, to the extent that it represents a post-structuralist position critical of the modernist certainties of Enlightenment and Western religio-philosophical traditions. No, in that Japanese society only has the appearance of a decentered social structure, but is still marked by an essentially unchanged (since WW II) socio-economic principles and practices. Yet where do these two meet? Is postmodernism really about a materialist restructuring of the social order or is it, merely an attitude of resignation, of philosophical rationalization for the inability to posit any course of action that would alter these conditions without bringing catastrophe down upon the social structures it seeks to change? That may be putting the question too starkly. Perhaps, postmodernist thought is eventually a solely descriptive model – as is spatial theory, which is really a subset of postmodernist thought – for a deeper reflection on the relationship of self, of being, of subject and subjectivization in a modernist world; but with its own utopian pretensions gelded, a witness – not a complainant – for the prosecution. As such, if the Kyoto School postulates a nothingness that ‘creates’ everything, can we ask what did it ‘create’ in Japan? It is a question worth investigating because there were definite ideological implications stemming from these ontological speculations.

Recent scholarship has shown that the philosophical propositions of the Kyoto School were used to support the imperialist ideology of wartime Japan. Nishitani, most famously in the 1942 “Symposium on Overcoming Modernity” (a postmodern enough sounding title), argued that Japan’s mission in the world was – and remember that this was at the height of World War II

– to spread the gospel of an enlightened Zen: “It constitutes a rejection of the colonization of East Asia; as an expression of the will toward communal independence based on the commonality of our historical culture, it signifies a demand for justice directed at the world.”<sup>96</sup> Nishitani goes on to argue that this was Japan’s responsibility because “only in Japan does east Asian culture and spirituality animate everyday life and provide the source of the ethos and spiritual nurture of the people.”<sup>97</sup>

Even the fact that the Zen preached by Nishitani is strongly influenced by Western philosophy is turned to advantage. Mori writes that

Nishitani saw Japan as the locus of this great encounter between the cultures of East and West. Even if the two worlds within Japan were still in a state of chaos, this very chaos was “a mark of superiority.” At a time when Western culture had spread throughout the world, Nishitani foresaw a corresponding spread of Eastern culture to the West. In these circumstances, Japan could not risk falling apart because of its internal cultural chaos. A certain order had to be imposed to protect it from disintegration. At the same time, for Japan to draw strength from its own historical tradition. Like any nation it had first to awaken to a sense of the uniqueness of its culture. This rooting in culture and history was necessary, he saw, ‘to give birth to a cultural *world* within oneself and also to open up a cultural *horizon of globality* in one’s innermost depths.’ The globality of culture is only possible through a “creative continuity with tradition.”<sup>98</sup>

Mori’s comment in revealing here in that it is possible to hear in Nishitani the old Meiji refrain that the way to strengthen Japan was to inculcate the knowledge of the barbarians, the threatening other, now extended not as principle of defence but of imperialist aggression. But even more significant is the *nihonjinron* evocation of cultural uniqueness and historical tradition

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<sup>96</sup> Quoted by Tesuro Mori, “Nishitani Keiji and the Question of Nationalism,” in *Rude Awakenings Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), p. 311.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p. 311



to bolster the nation's sense of self and destiny.

The revelation of Nishitani and the Kyoto School's philosophic support of the wartime regime was such a shock to Japanese scholars – particularly those in the West – that a number of articles, collected in book form, were written asking whether, as James Van Bragt (Nishitani's translator) puts it, the Kyoto School philosophy is “intrinsically nationalistic?” Accepting that some of what the School's leaders said as being a result of having to avoid trouble with the regime, the question still polluted the rarefied air of these philosophical abstractions. The commentators agree that Nishitani was not a simple-minded or rabid nationalist, but his political position was based on his wider philosophical view and represented, in fact, a kind of activation of the principles he espoused. A correlation of thought and practice that caused a similar ruckus in regard to his former teacher Heidegger. But even more significant, it pushed Nishitani's supporters and indeed, the whole foundation of intellectual Zen to ask whether the logic-defying silence beyond the confines of language, the ‘absolute nothingness’ that cannot be reached solely by the intellect but only as an experiential mode of perception boundlessly free of the divide of alterity, of otherness, did not harbor an intrinsic fascism; or, at the very least, its core contained a particular brand of nationalism. Without indulging in the various critiques of these doubters, it is illustrative to quote Robert Sharf, who summarizes his position thus:

While this intellectualized Zen avers to leave things just as they are, in fact it utterly emasculates the “other,” eliminating the possibility for real dialogue or external critique. In the end, Zen's response to plurality is a strategic retreat to “the still point of the turning world,” which effaces alterity in the name of an experientially vibrant but politically ominous “nonduality.” I fully concur with James Van Bragt's invocation of Emmanuel Lévinas in this regard: “this alleged integration [of self and Other] is cruelty and

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p. 311-12.

injustice.”<sup>99</sup>

About whether the Kyoto School’s philosophical position contained in its heart a secret fascism, it is also interesting to relate the views of Nishitani’s teacher, the founder of the School. Nishida, who by the 1930s – the decade that saw the military in Japan rise to power – had become a special advisor to Emperor Hirohito, wrote about what he saw as the relationship of the individual to the whole. This was based on his philosophy that the self must be negated to embrace the nothingness (*mu*) and it is from this embrace that the self could find the unity that underlies all existence. In applying this idea to Japanese history, Nishida wrote that it is “neither the whole opposing the individual nor the individual opposing the whole, but rather that with the Imperial Household as the center, the individual and the whole mutually negate themselves [for the imperial sovereign].”<sup>100</sup>

This is a crucial step. What began as a universalistic and non-political religious philosophy became linked to the political agenda of the military rulers of the country. This subtle Oriental philosophy would give metaphysical succor to the dream of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere; that grand 1930s imperialist vision that blended the desire to rid the Orient of the white man while at the same moment announcing the arrival of the Japanese “liberators.” Indeed, one could say that in the subjugation wrought by the Japanese oppressors was also the promise of liberation, a liberation of the individual self: And the Oriental self. The Japanese were ‘there,’ in China, in Korea, in Burma, in the Philippines, as friend/defender/liberator and ‘not

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Sharf, “Whose Zen?” in *Rude Awakenings*, p. 39-40.

<sup>100</sup> *Arima*. p. 11.

there' as conqueror/oppressor/imperialist. In the unshackling of itself from the bonds of the Other (Occidental ideas, invention and power that, since Tokugawa times, existed as the great "barbaric" force that must be embraced and resisted), Japan would help its neighbors, its sister nations to realize the same profound destiny of liberation. Is this 'The Logic of the East?' For what was the "Co-Prosperity Sphere" but a velvet glove that held the soft promise of harmony, un-centered yet cooperative, the space for the pursuit of self-realization, the sweet is/is not paradox of life's mystery that we must efface ourselves in front of so that the "pure experience" of existence can be revealed; or inversely, unsheathed, it is the iron fist of subjugation and terror, of service to the "Imperial Household," the *real politik* of imperialism, the all too obvious 'presence' of rape, murder, exploitation and enslavement.<sup>101</sup>

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Whether this history of 'postmodern' thought in Japan will be the destiny of postmodernism at large remains an open question. However, what is instructive is that the rush to embrace Japan-as-postmodern-nation is fraught with difficulties, not only because of the ideological proclivities of such a postmodernism, but also for its failure to be a complete description of the actual social dynamic. What eludes the early postmodernist adoption of Japanese thought is precisely its inability to 'read' the social, materialist and indeed, historical

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<sup>101</sup> If this is perhaps a too harsh a criticism of the effects of a disengaged philosophy that succumbs to a manipulative political ideology, it is worth quoting a passage from *Kokutai no Hongi*, a wartime propaganda tract:

'Harmony is a product of the great achievements of the founding of the nation, and is the power behind our historical growth; it is also a humanitarian Way inseparable from our daily lives... Harmony as in our nation is a great harmony of individuals who, by giving play to their individual differences, and through difficulties, toil and labor, converge as one. War, in this sense, is not by any means intended for destruction, overpowering, or subjugation of others; and it should be a thing for the bringing out of great harmony, that is, peace, doing the work of creation by following the Way.' quoted in Bernard Faure, "The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism," *Japan in*

dialectic of the nation; whereas the 'later' postmodern critique comes not to praise Japan/Japanese thought, but to bury it under accusations of fascism and rampant nationalism. Thought is never entirely negated by praxis (and vice versa), however, and thus the fundamental insights of the Buddhist conception of reality cannot be entirely denigrated on these grounds. Either way, it should be acknowledged that every philosophical position eventually has blood on its hands, even if it is only figuratively so by virtue of in-action. Postmodernism, if it is ever to be the overriding construct that 'explains' the world, may yet live to see such an outcome itself. (Mark Lilla's political reading of Derrida's supposedly "mystical" turn to "the idea of justice" sounds the same sort of alarm bells that have been here applied to the Kyoto School).<sup>102</sup> And, finally, it must be asked, who is served by this deconstruction of the (Japanese) other? Is there some vestige of Orientalism here that seeks to deconstruct the Other on the altar of its own (Occidental) need for assertion, dominance, presence?

Rather than valorize one approach over another however, it is possibly more advantageous to allow each to stand. As Steven Heine says of his own four-part anthropological model in the context of Japan, "these discourses are neither left to stand in polarity nor promoted

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*Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995), p. 280.

<sup>102</sup> Lilla, like many others hostile to Derrida, seems to suggest that deconstruction is politically dangerous because it undoes every logocentric position without offering any means of positive political engagement. However when Derrida does offer up (in *Force de Loi* and *Specters of Marx*) 'an infinite "idea of justice"' as something "infinitely irreducible" and therefore beyond the linguistic powers of deconstruction, thus an "emancipatory promise" that could guide us out of an existential impasse, Lilla sees his opportunity to lambast this position as being a kind of mysticism, or as he says, borrowed freely from the "messianic" writings of Emmanuel Lévinas. (Mark Lilla, "The Politics of Jacques Derrida," in *New York Review of Books* (June 25, 1998, volume XLV, No. 11), pp. 36-41). In Western philosophical and political discourse, this, of course, is the kiss of death. Coward, on the other hand, notes that Derrida, influenced by Lévinas, recognizes silence as creating the possibility of language (Coward, p. 143), and is thus able to better link him with Indian philosophy. Much of his analysis comes from "Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas" in *Writing and Difference*, and it casts Derrida's position in a much more positive light; however, in the context of what I have been describing vis a vis

into an artificial synthesis, but are allowed to play off of, bisect, undermine or reorient each other in continual hermeneutic interaction.” Heine’s model describes four levels of discourse:

1) Postmodernism-1, the somewhat romanticized philosophical linkage between Kyoto School philosophy and poststructuralism; (2) Postmodernism-2, which deconstruct the relationship of this Buddhist-inspired philosophy with Japanese militarism; (3) Nihonism, the traditional centralization of competing discourses into a celebration of Japanese uniqueness; and (4) Textual and Social Scientific Evidence that reveals the concealed patriarchy at the heart of the supposedly decentric society.<sup>103</sup>

Heine’s anthropologically inspired model is close to my own understanding of the social dynamics prevalent in Japan and Japanese culture. The one significant difference – and it is structural -- is in his fourth point, which hinges on the “hidden” nature of Japanese patriarchy and social controls. While I am in agreement with the idea that the concealment of power is a veritable trope in Japanese society, I relate it to spatial separation. It is part of the dencentering process. I am not convinced it represents a separate discursive category. In a way – I cannot help but note this – it is the strategy of a spatial discourse to allow each thing to stand in its singularity even as it participates in, moves with, is penetrated by, transforms and is being transformed by the other. Japan does call spatial theory forward, in this regard. But perhaps it is beneficial to conclude this section with Derek Gregory’s closing remarks in one of the seminal texts of this theoretical approach:

The task of a critical human geography – of a geographical imagination – is, I suggest, to unfold that utopian gesture and replace it with another: one that recognizes the *corporeality of vision* and reaches out, *from one body to another*, not in a mood of

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Japanese 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, Derridean thought may not appreciate such a tight embrace.

<sup>103</sup> Steven Heine, “*Ie*-ism and the Discourse of Postmodernism,” in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, p. 48.

arrogance, aggression, and conquest but in a spirit of humility, understanding, and care. This is not an individualism; neither is it a corporatism. If it dispenses with the privileges traditionally accorded to "History," it nonetheless requires a scrupulous attention to the junctures and fissures between many different histories: a multileveled dialogue between past and present conducted as a history (or an historical geography) of the present.<sup>104</sup>

Amen. But can we look at Japanese cinema in this way, as the 'corporeality' of so many unuttered, invisible modes of being and becoming? And what of the ideological implications inherent in a society that privileges space over time, being over becoming? How is this dynamic played out in the films? And is film, by its very nature, transgressive of national boundaries? Or, alternatively, is the term 'National Cinema' already an attempt to restrict cinema's postnational possibilities? These questions will be addressed – if not answered – in the following sections. The relationship between Japanese society and cinema evokes such a discourse.

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<sup>104</sup> Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 416.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Empty Cinema

Cinema -- perhaps more so than other visual arts -- continues to articulate many of the hopes and fears typical of the *nihonjinron* discourse. Japanese cinema's productivity and popularity, especially in the 1950s, would suggest that it has had both a constraining and transformative effect on audiences. Thus, by focusing on a select but varied number of Japanese films from two radically different eras, one can begin to discern the shape of this effect, its shifting shape. Though varied in genres, time periods, authorship, studio conditions of their production, though diverse in their political and social concerns and intent, the postwar films -- in particular their temporal and spatial structures (both within and outside of the films) -- examined here will explore the relationship between cinema and the sense of nation to determine (the nature of) the role they played in re-constituting the national self-image after the war.

During the 1950s, this was the largest single-language cinema in the world.<sup>105</sup> The number of films made in this period and the huge audiences they enjoyed indicates -- I believe -- the general popularity and force of the *nihonjinron* discourse at the cinematic level. The famous filmmakers of the time -- Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Akira Kurosawa, Kon Ichikawa and others -- show in their work a serious concern to express, at an artistic level, the human price paid during the re-construction period. But equally important was that the structural patterns of the films in a sense charted the incredible changes that were occurring in the social, economic

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<sup>105</sup> Anderson and Richie report that throughout the 1950s, the number of Japanese feature films released averaged about 500 annually. In terms of market share, Japanese films held about 70% of Japanese audiences, with American and some other national cinemas being in the minority. As the years went by, however, these figures would begin to reverse. In 1951, for example, 75 foreign movies were shown in Japan, of these, 63% were American. By the end of the decade, the percentage breakdown was about equal. ("A Survey of Postwar Japanese Movies," by Hiroshi Minami in *Japanese Popular Culture*, edited and translated by Hidetoshi Kata (Tokyo: Chales E. Tuttle Company,

and political arena. Because of this, it is important to understand the films not solely within the poetics of an individual film or even between films, but within a broader ethnographic and philosophical context as performing a role within the dynamics of social practices. The broader context that is being explored here comprises issues of the state, cultural traditions, history, sociology, nationalism, Western influence (in particular, America) and the cosmological embrace of Japan's religio-philosophical understanding. If this appears wide-ranging, it is necessarily so in that questions about National Cinema are best answered in the realm of the nation than, strictly speaking, solely in the cinema.

Saying this, it is still very much useful and necessary to explore these films structurally; but from the outside in. From a wider, in some cases more abstract sense of how time and space (as implying some kind of aesthetic, sociopolitical and even religious principles) inform the style and import of the films. At the very least, it is important to pursue how the films both reflect and contain the viewer and, sometimes, even the nation itself. It is not enough to see this as a one-way street, as history and culture informing the films, but just the reverse: how the films inform/construct ideas of nation and even self. The spatio-temporal structure of the films, in other words, can be paradigmatic and instrumental in re-constructing the culture: they emerge out of the culture (and this is reflected in their structural dynamic), but also play a vital role in (re-)creating the social and cultural shape of the post-war era.

My 'structural methodology' is an attempt to apply an understanding of the culture and society as the foundation upon which to view the structures of the films. 'Classical Narrative' as the basis for analyzing Japanese film plays a smaller role and only becomes a significant factor



when discussing the relationship of Japanese cinema (and Japan, for that matter) to Western influences. Therefore this analysis is structural in that the films reveal the imprint of the culture - which in the post-war period is marked indelibly by the West! -- but it is a culture that treats the outside influences as passing (as time, as other) and sutures them into the 'everlasting' or more precisely, the prevailing structures and spaces of the nation. In other words, 'cinematic classical narrative' can be utilized without necessarily being the central defining criteria for an analysis of the films.

How a particular film is constructed and in turn how it 'constructs' the viewer speaks to how a nation constructs itself. That we may be -- as individuals and nations -- perpetually 'under construction,' is concurrent with perceiving self/identity as the ever-shifting inter-action of time and space (in cinema as in life itself). Japan is particularly interesting in this regard because often the manipulations of the spatio-temporal elements (both visual and narrative) in its films do not seem to move toward a meaningful, satisfying conclusion, but away from it. Not toward a sense of resolution or closure, or even a feeling of comprehension, the satisfactions of logos. Rather, there is a pervasive mood of tragedy -- or less dramatically, uncertainty, sadness, resignation -- that casts a pall over the narratives, suggesting an inconclusiveness; the futility of the characters attempts to reach a state of permanence, or, ironically, that the characters are held within a permanence that is still amounting to the same sense of futility. The films do not seem to resolve the hermeneutical puzzles of their structure or narrative, but empty them of relevance. They look not toward a Promised Land of happy endings but peer into a chasm, an emptiness or nothingness that ultimately awaits the characters and their actions. It is an overstatement, of course, for no national cinema can be defined in terms of a singular mood, but this sense of

instability, of the awaiting of a sequel (?), of even 'happy endings' being only momentary, contextual, characterizes so many of the films I have viewed. The effect is to subvert the 'rules' of the classical narrative -- in particular, the traditional modes of closure found in Western cinematic practice -- at the same instant that they are employed. The reasons for this seem to reside in the socio-cultural legacy which, combined with the religio-philosophical world view, is so powerful and comprehensive that it would be a more convincing candidate for 'defining' Japanese cinema than the structural model based on mainstream western cinema (no matter how profound the impact of the West has been on contemporary Japan).

Such a reading is not merely to value one approach over the other, but to point out the efficacy of opening up the discourse about cinema to the wider possibilities of a spatially influenced reading of culture. For films are not only a structure reflecting certain particularized social, economic and historical influences, but a heterotopic space that is at once metonymically part of (and apart from) the wider culture. It both mimics and resists these larger cultural and statist concerns. It is product and producer of the imagined community, an ethnic neighborhood in the city of dreams. To discuss National Cinema in particular is to stress the 'National,' to examine how (and if) the cinema is produced out of the conjunction of state, nation, culture, religious, philosophical and historical dynamics. It is to enter into a space that is a self-conscious ethnography, a mirror set in a studio of mirrors reflecting, distorting and further orienting and disorienting the viewer, the subject of the discourse; sentenced as s/he is to the constant play of seeing, being seen, being blinded.

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Maybe it is because of Roland Barthes' small text on Japan, *Empire of Signs*. In it he speaks of Japan as having an 'empty center,' a particular trait that is related to Buddhist ontological conceptions, but one that can be traced throughout the structure and dynamic of Japanese society. How true in fact this idea is can be easily dismissed by the simple observation that modern day Japan is as much infiltrated by outside influences as it is by its own religious past – a past that is also much more than Buddhism. Barthes' imagined Japan is perhaps more a creation of his own semiological concerns – a Japan on the Seine – than the island nation perched on the edge of the Asian archipelago. It is more *nouveau* Orientalism than a serious analysis of Japanese society. However misguided his position may be – and one gets the sense that Barthes was teasing<sup>106</sup> by deliberately misreading a society he casually professed to have little understanding or experience of – it did open up a discussion of Japan as the postmodern society *par excellence*. (And the issue of Orientalism). It is enticing however, and I hope this analysis treads a fine line between embracing certain ideas about nothingness that are traditionally Buddhist (and related to contemporary theory) while still remaining open to the materially based arguments that ground an understanding of Japan in ideological and historical approaches; that, indeed, the two are not separate discourses, but related in praxis, if not in theory.

In the films, it is as if for a time the (narrative) concerns of man hold sway in the imagination, but must return to the ground of Being: the essential nothingness, the white light

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<sup>106</sup> Barthes calls Japan his 'fictive nation,' a place he has imagined. This phrase harks back to Oscar Wilde's famous one liner: "In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such

that supports the incarnations of movement, of life, of film. It is not so much an ending with the blaring trumpets of completion and judgment, retribution and triumph, but a dissolve into Soundless-ness, silence, acceptance.

In the term *mono no aware*, for example, often associated in cinema with the work of Yasujiro Ozu, one can literally 'feel' this idea: Keiji Nishitani, in one of his rare excursions into aesthetics writes that "What the Japanese call *mono no aware* ("the pathos of things") indicates the point where lust and joy are one with a sadness over the feeling of impermanence. In other words, the phrase signifies that where the being of man, as something bound to things in time, rises to awareness "perfumed" with the feeling of world and time and under the Form of infinity, there also the essential impermanence of all things, or sheer being-in-the-world, is *aesthetically* felt to the quick – in the Kierkegaardian sense of "aesthetic existence." It means that all things of the world and the self itself are realized together aesthetically, in the original countenance of their manifestation."<sup>107</sup>

Japanese cinema (and culture) is seductive in this sense because it calls the academic forward to a silence that s/he is wont to fill with all sort of furious noise. Perched on the edge of this canyon, the space merely echoes with one's own voice, one's own hypothesis running into thesis. Thus the question lingers: can one, out of this echoing sound, discern the epistemological shape of the ever-silent canyon? One balances precariously, for to lose one's footing is to fall into the silence or, alternately, to bellow incessantly is to try and efface this silence in an air-blast, a 'little man' exploding (and sending its phallic cloud up through the emptied Oriental space) and

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people."

<sup>107</sup> *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 247.

demolishing this hypocentre whose impenetrable silence one cannot bear. It is an emptiness. And in cinema, as in atomic explosions, light. The unbearable lightness of being: an ontological desire that is both passive and aggressive, that must rage against yet accept distance (space); an ontological desire that cannot understand from within, but only through epistemological soundings, the epiphanies of time.

It is a Heideggerean conception that Being always hides its true face from us; that the ontological longing can never be fully consummated, is always out of reach, always 'not-this', absent at the moment of its 'present-ness.' Japan evokes this idea in that it is a society within which one never wants to 'lose face'; it would mean the crumbling of this fantastical airiness, lightness, this facade of time that somehow never disturbs the space. The philosophical underpinnings of the culture – articulated best by Zen monks, but shared across the religio-aesthetic spectrum – do not suggest that Being is masked, but that it is entirely absent and one should take at face value what is being offered at the same time that it does not tell the 'true' story. That it is the play of appearances and disappearances that is 'real,' not the hidden presence of Being. If this sounds poststructuralist, in particular Derridean, it differs in one significant aspect: It refuses to offer language as a model to paper over the essential emptiness at the 'center' of the play. As such, Zen calls for an obliteration of the self -- primarily through meditation -- as a means of seeing what has been present to ones eyes all along. This concept could be termed 'radical phenomenology' for it pushes the poststructuralist deconstruction of the subject one step farther to the point of non-existence. And yet, again unlike the deconstruction project, it offers enlightenment, a full-ness out of this emptiness.

What is so fascinating to an outside observer is that while this conception of self as 'empty' is almost always characterized as beyond language, that it can only be understood experientially-- as Zen and Taoist teachers repeat like a mantra -- it does leave traces of itself in the society as a whole. That there still remains an onto-theological dimension to this I would argue is linked to the more prosaic concerns of nationalism, national identity -- the various existential critiques of *Nihonjinron*. Or so I believe. In essence, this emptiness is apparent in the way that the society is organized -- competing influences, separated but not equalized, revolving around an empty center -- and is particularly visible in the arts. This work then is an attempt to meditate on post-war Japanese cinema around some core observations about cultural notions of time and space as they relate to nothingness. This 'nothingness' becomes the basis not only for a deeper understanding of self, but also of the concept of nation.

I realize, in retrospect, that this particular terminology owes more to my readings in Japanese religion and philosophy and thus may be confusing to a Western reader, so it may be useful to suggest that the Asian idea of 'self' is within our own context mostly construed as 'subject' and 'nothingness' tends to correlate with 'social space.' Of course, the differences still remain because Western theoretical constructs are not nearly so explicitly religious. However, the construction of the 'subject' as a relational entity, thus intimately involved with the social space, while indebted to contemporary psychoanalytic and linguistic theories in the West, does resonate with the Chinese-influenced Buddhism that characterized much of Japanese intellectual thought. Reading the following short passage from Graham Parkes (who has written and edited a number of books and articles on the relationship of Heidegger and Nietzsche to Asian thought) may help to connect these terminological similarities:

Buddhist thought is particularly opposed to the substantialist view that there are *independently* existing things, claiming that everything is “itself” only in relation to a set of conditions that make it what it is. And again, the same is true for the “non-thing” that is the human self: It, too, is what it is only in relation to other things. The idea that things do not possess an inherent “self-nature” was already current in some schools of Chinese thought. As was the idea of the world as constant flux.”<sup>108</sup>

To pursue these questions of 'self' and 'nothingness' and how they intersect, indeed are elemental in constructing notions of national cinema, I have chosen to concentrate on films from two time periods: the early to mid-50s and the mid-80s to early 90s. The first period encompasses the latter years of the Occupation (which ended in 1952, exactly one hundred years after Commodore Perry's 'opening' of Japan) and thus the early part of the reconstruction when Japan was in its second 'golden age of cinema' (the first, according to Noël Burch, being in the 1930s) and in a time of socio-economic struggle. The second period was in all respects the opposite: a time of prosperity, of the “internationalization” of Japan, but one commonly regarded as a period of cinematic decline. What links the two periods, however, is what I consider the particular nature of the Japanese understanding of time and space. An understanding that is rooted in the metaphysical speculations of its philosophers but that ultimately speaks to issues of nation and identity.

How I 'understand' culture is how I understand its cinema. This simple precept is perhaps the reverse of the current formalist critiques emerging from the work of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and others that generally posit 'Classical Hollywood Narrative' as the cinematic base against which other local (and national) variants can be examined. That the dominance of the

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<sup>108</sup> Graham Parkes, “Ways of Japanese Thinking,” in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture A Reader*, edited by Nancy G. Hume (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 84.

classical-narrative system is so pervasive that cultural differences account for mere coloring and an emphasis on certain structural elements; but that ultimately the mainstream cinema (at the very least) of Japan -- and one suspects most other nations -- is not so radically different or even significantly a variation of Hollywood productions. Noël Burch contests this position by arguing that the uniqueness (and non-Western value) of Japanese culture is such that the influence of traditional art forms (such as Kabuki and Noh theatre, scroll paintings, etc.) and the coalescence of certain industrial and historical factors (for example: the effect of Japan's long Tokugawa isolation, the rise of pre-World War II nationalism in the 1930s, the institution of the *benshi* – a theatre narrator who stood beside the screen to 'explain' and comment on the action) led to a Japanese cinematic golden age in the 1930s. A cinema markedly different from the Institutional Mode of Representation (Burch's version of Classical Hollywood Narrative that is different in that it emphasizes and critiques the ideological effect of this industrialized manner of production) because it broke free from the seemingly endless repetition of films that focused on psychologically motivated characters and revealed an obsession with narrative continuity and other illusory practices. Yet despite their differences, both Bordwell and Burch are linked by the object-oriented nature of their critiques. While Burch celebrates the formal differences of Japanese cinema in the pre-War era (and laments its alignment with the IMR under pressure from America after 1945), Bordwell uses the film career of Ozu to argue that Japanese cinema, almost from its inception, bears the mark of the classical (read American) narrative.

Both are, in some sense, right. Japanese films bear the mark of both Japanese and American (or, if you will Western) influences; be they aesthetic, cultural, institutional, historical



or otherwise. As such, the 'material semiology' of Burch and the 'historical poetics' of Bordwell are efficacious, valuable in that they both draw attention to the formal principles at work in the cinema.

Historical Poetics -- as espoused in the work of David Bordwell and others (primarily out of the University of Iowa and University of Wisconsin at Madison)<sup>109</sup> -- views the distinctive cultural legacy of a particular nation as coloring the standard (western) linear narrative. It, writes Henry Jenkins, borrows heavily from the work of Jan Mukarovsky, E.H. Gombrich and Viktor Shklovsky as well as semiology, structuralism, reader-response theory and cognitive psychology. It is investigative and less interested in interpretation than explanation. Applied to film, "[a]esthetic principles are understood as historic facts to be documented and interpreted in the larger contexts of the film's production, circulation and reception."<sup>110</sup> He goes on to describe Bordwell as the leading proponent of this critical approach in film studies, starting with the seminal work, co-authored with Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. In it they posit 'classical narrative' as the dominant form, the norm against which all Hollywood cinema -- and in later work, other national cinemas (particularly Japan's) -- must be viewed: "These norms constitute a determinant set of assumptions about how a movie should behave, about what stories it properly tells and how it should tell them, about the range and functions of film technique, and about the activities of the

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<sup>109</sup> I must admit that while I am taking a purposely oppositional stance to the formalist approach, I am heavily indebted to its hermeneutics; and furthermore, to Bordwell and Thompson, who taught me at The University of Iowa in the early 1980s.

<sup>110</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Historical poetics," in *Approaches to Popular Film*, eds. Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 101.

spectator.”<sup>111</sup> Jenkins notes, however, that transgression of these norms is not necessarily negative; instead, they can be seen as a means of adapting, embellishing, ‘expanding the aesthetic vocabulary.’ In other words, they contribute to an understanding of the dominant system; and indeed, formalist critics like Bordwell and Thompson (and their student, Darrell Davis) seem drawn to works that deviate from the ‘norms’ (like pre-war Japanese films) for just this reason. Thus Bordwell, writing ten years after *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, argues that the “distinctiveness of Japanese film style is best understood as a transformation of [the] norms of Western decoupage.”<sup>112</sup> He acknowledges that this claim puts him at odds with those who would give “pride of place to the influence of indigenous Japanese culture,” but in a subtle shift tries to accommodate the alternate view by arguing that “the assimilation of traditional elements in Japanese films takes place primarily through the mediations of international filmmaking norms and contemporary popular culture.”<sup>113</sup>

In his pursuit of national visual style, Bordwell maintains a consistent position: that Japanese cinema has to be understood in terms of its adaptation of Classical Hollywood Narrative, the dominant form. Such an account of the historical development of this style, however, is always predicated on positions of power, dominance, the global influence of Hollywood. The notion of a unique style only makes sense if it is viewed as a distortion, a resistance to this over determination. Inversely, the final result is that any appearance of classical decoupage is treated as evidence of Western (read: American) influences. To bolster this view, it is necessary to downgrade the importance of traditional aesthetics in lieu of the more clearly

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<sup>111</sup> David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> David Bordwell, “Visual Style in Japanese Cinema 1925-45,” *Film History*, (Spring: 7-1), p. 5.

visible effects on film of popular culture and institutional practices. The fact that, for the most part, Japanese films – as indeed films around the world – conform to a classical narrative paradigm of shot composition and editing as well as comparable institutional practices, affirms for Bordwell the truly spectacular position and persistence of the classical form.

Historical Poetics, and its off-shoot, ‘Monumental Style,’ is a culmination of these critical approaches to the study of film in general, and Japanese cinema in particular. Indeed, it is interesting that Japanese cinema plays a crucial role in the development of the larger term as both Bordwell and Thompson have written extensively on Japanese film.<sup>114</sup> As the term itself implies, there is an attempt to historicize the poetics (formal elements/structures, style) of a film, to chart the course of its production, the pulse of the historical moment to illustrate the effect of ‘history’ (though it is usually *contemporary* history, that is a history without too long a memory for that might permit too many indigenous and traditional elements) on the formal elements at play in the film. The formalist (or neoformalist) analysis, historicized in such a way, responsive to the time and place of their production, is not without sense and merit, but where it threatens to come apart is in its refusal to reach beyond the film – or its style – for any other *raison d’être* for the analysis. History or particularized cultural factors are reduced to being seen as mere ‘color,’ a decorative element of the *mise en scène* or a “parametric” form that is a *divertissement* from the standard narrative format. Film criticism is often simply film appreciation and, even more

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>114</sup> I am referring specifically specifically to Bordwell’s *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988), Davis’ *Monumental Style* (1996) and Kristin Thompson’s chapter on Ozu’s *Late Spring* on her book, *Breaking the Glass Armor Neoformalist Film Analyses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). This chapter is a brilliant and exhaustive accounting of the film that posits Ozu’s ‘unreasonable style’ as an example of “parametric form;” essentially forms that diverge from classical narrative norms.

disappointingly, a dry bones disassembling of the film to see how it works in relation to the usual practice. History serves poetics, but until Davis' work on 'monumental style,' the favor is seldom returned. What sets Davis' text apart from Bordwell and Thompson's conception of history in servitude to poetics, is his ability to temper the ideological drift of their work -- that constantly returns to the classical text as a predominantly American creation -- by demonstrating how the films reinterpret indigenous traditions, aesthetics and ideological preoccupations to serve the particular historical moment. Like me, he is indebted to (ironically) their style, but it is when he inverts their approach and 'places' the films back in Japan that his analysis is able to move away from merely the 'film as film' and toward a more fruitful engagement with the historical and cultural milieu that the films enter into.

My argument against this dialectic is to question whether the globalizing nature of Hollywood cinema is so complete; whether, in fact, the resulting stress on applying 'objective' standards, a structural model that, even though historicized and made subtle to accommodate individual quirks and differences, can really account for the uniqueness, or discursive, relational position of these films within their culture. That, ironically, object-oriented criticism is missing the forest for the trees. That, perhaps, the reverse may be more revealing about the films: the objects may be similar (or not), but the effect, their 'place' within the culture is what makes the object 'mean' differently. In a cultural tradition that treats time and space differently, the importance of my overall position in regard to cinema within culture becomes more necessary and prescient.

In some respects, my position stems from but is a significant departure from one taken by

Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie in the seminal text *The Japanese Film*. Their approach assumes, as Donald Kiriara so succinctly puts it, is that “*Japanese cinema is different because the creators (and to a lesser extent, the viewers) have a different aesthetic sense.*” (original italics)<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, as Kiriara also notes, such a “temperamental” view, tends to eulogize certain directorial styles while remaining blind to specific historical circumstances and developmental changes. From my perspective then, it is crucial to make clear the historical development and disjunctures as they relate to the nation and its cinema. This work does not focus on the films of any one director or any specific genre. It relates to ‘a period in Japanese film history’ but is not strictly a historical presentation. It is, instead, a meditation on the relationship of history to the films; at least in part, since it more comprehensively aims to investigate the wider realm of the relationship of time to space as rendered within the texts. The film critiques do, however, borrow from the close textual analyses performed by Bordwell (on Ozu) and Kristin Thompson (on Ozu’s classic *Late Spring*), while acknowledging the historical weight of an aesthetic sensibility as understood by Burch; though I tend to emphasize the discursive arena into which the film enter over some static conception of Japanese aesthetics inherited from the *Heian* age. As such, I am attempting to position the films within the cultural space-time that is fundamentally at odds with any strictly formal or object-oriented criticism; to examine the films’ formal properties as a relationship to the larger national discourse. Bordwell and Thompson (Burch less so) tend to portray this formal investigation as an end unto itself; and

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<sup>115</sup> Donald Kiriara, “Reconstructing Japanese Film,” in *Post-Theory Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), p. 503.

thus, like Michael Walsh<sup>116</sup> in his defence of cinema from psychoanalytic notions of a (he argues) weakly theorized formulation of “national imaginary,” they resist any but the most speculative comments that would suggest that the films ‘speak’ the nation. To some extent, they are right to be wary, but by ‘dislocating’ the films from their spatial ‘home,’ by only strictly emphasizing their structural relationship to a central narrative system *outside* the culture they risk stifling the wider (and more wonderous) discourse about cinema itself.

Davis in *Picturing Japaneseness Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* schematizes three models for approaching national cinema: *reflectionist*, *dialogic* and *contamination*. He argues that the reflectionist mode arose during the “golden age of national cinema” in the 1960s “because film critics were poised to write about this explosion of cinematic experimentation in relation to the social and political cultures from which it arose. New ways of talking and writing about film were devised not only to elucidate the provenance of the films but also to analyze the infinite variety of cinematic expressions used to represent the cultural landscape onscreen.”<sup>117</sup> It became particularly immersed in *auteur* critiques; especially in the celebration of the artistic work of great directors. The effect was to say: “If artists have citizenship, then art movies do too.” With the growth of the art house movies, those films

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<sup>116</sup> Michael Walsh, “National cinema, national imaginary,” *Film History*, Vol 8, Spring 1996. Pp. 5-17. Walsh writes that “analysis of the nation holds out the promise of grounding analysis of ideological discursive practices in their specific historical moments and of more thoroughly politicizing them through establishing linkages to institutional practices within the nation-state.” (p. 6). But, he argues, ‘national critiques’ often misappropriate Benedict Anderson’s term ‘imagined communities,’ which was originally meant as a “social epistemology, tracking a change in forms of social organization,” to a Lacanian-influenced, and unsupported claim for a ‘national imaginary,’ which Walsh characterizes as a site for all manner of projection (by the critic). It is important, Walsh reminds us, to draw a distinction between ‘national identity’ and ‘personal identity,’ a warning that may often be ignored by psychoanalytical critiques.

<sup>117</sup> Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 18.

deemed internationally worthy, the *dialogic model*, emphasized a film's "similarities and differences to other works, usually from Western cinema." But inevitably, the last model – *contamination* – "sees cinema as an institution that is profoundly, inescapably *international*."<sup>118</sup>

From this three-part modelization, Davis' comments on the concept of national cinema, both as a critical term and a reality can be understood:

National cinema is a promiscuous notion, both historically and conceptually. The idea of national cinema as expression of a distinct sovereign identity is a relatively recent one, compared with the unhampered flow of films across national boundaries for twenty years before World War I. From the beginning cinema was incorrigibly cross-cultural, or at least cross-national. This is what led film industries in France, Germany, Japan, England and other countries in the 1920s to protect their domestic markets, to discourage talent from emigrating, and to articulate the idea of national cinema as a bulwark *against* the encroachment of Hollywood, Moscow or Paris. National cinema is not just some limpid reflection of personality and politics. We could then reconceive the nation as an effect of technologies and institutions like cinema, rather than a preexisting thing that expresses itself by cinematic means....

Of the three models sketched above, it is the oldest one, the reflectionist, that is the most hermetic. It should not be too surprising that the model from the "golden age" of national cinema should be the one that seeks the purest possible distillation of national form and *Geist* in cinema. The other two, dialogic and contamination, routinely assume the existence and the necessity, respectively, of narrative and stylistic miscegenation between national cultures and across media.<sup>119</sup>

From this understanding, Davis proceeds to emphasize the dialogic model – while acknowledging the presence of the two competing approaches – in outlining his concept of 'Monumental Style' in Japanese cinema. For him, the style most closely associated with national identity can be found in the *jidai-geki* (period films) that deify certain filmic techniques (slow pacing, static camera, an overwhelming emphasis on the formal patterns in the *mise en scène*, an austere narrative progress and so forth) thus imbuing them with a spirituality and stern moral

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

depth and solidity. These characteristics of the Monumental Style are not so much linked to traditional Japanese aesthetics but represent the fetishization of particular cinematic forms that are inherent in the classical narrative style. That they are utilized to promote Japan as a sacred land, to bolster national identity and the historical and aesthetic ties that bind each Japanese person to another, only serves to underline – in my estimation -- the ironies implicit in any investigation of national cinema.

I have spent some time with Davis' ideas about Japanese cinema because they reach some of the same conclusions about the importance of national identity to the films, but from a different perspective (and using different films). He is still principally bound to a dialogic model that views all mainstream national cinema as pertaining to the 'Royal Road,' the classical narrative (Hollywood) cinema. Whereas my approach, to use his terminology, would be an attempt to reinterpret the reflectionist model so that it can respond to charges of anti-historicism and its simple-minded refusal to understand the extent of the Other's presence in any national space. But the reason for my obstinance in this regard is that it is from a reflectionist model (new and improved, hopefully) that we can begin to hear what is being spoken in these films.

My analysis tends to be a hermeneutical reading of the films, but one that must understand how the films reflect – or contest – the greater cultural environment within which they circulate. The object (film) speaks a certain way, but to be understood, to mean, it must be speaking the language of the culture and time within which they are made. This 'language' is not impermeable – it permits any manner of foreign expressions (though a separate alphabet has

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 20-21.



been created to accommodate them) – but it is still spoken within the nation; itself permeated by other influences. This is not a static process, but one constantly evolving. In the spatial and temporal make-up of the films can be discerned what is spoken, but also what remains unspoken, repressed if you will. What is being said (or not) is part of the larger discourse of the nation. Thus what is being said is also beyond the film. However this relationship of film to nation is not so tightly bound (not merely a reflection); rather it is loosely related, associative. I do not share the epistemological optimism that unrelentingly links ‘fact’ to meaning, signifier to signified. Hence a work comprised of two parallel, correlative discourses, a bi-focal analysis/meditation: One on nation; One on cinema. That they intersect, are metonymically linked, but also metaphoric, standing apart, is what provides the dynamic tension that must be explored for the films to have any value beyond their simple and/or complex presence.

In many ways, the approach here is to treat the cinema as well as the society utilizing all three of the models that Davis has outlined. Japanese society seems as hermetically sealed as a reflectionist discourse suggests, but also Western-influenced (dialogic) and, by the 1980s if not earlier, increasingly internationalized (the notion of contamination). Thus the dynamic is not purely on cinematic terms, but an interplay of constantly shifting elements that include the cinema. In this way, the films can be seen as speaking to the culture at large not as merely revolving within their own orbit; which is how the object-oriented analyses often appear.

Both Bordwell and Burch – though from opposing viewpoints -- posit the influence of culture and history on the films, but because of their purely durational understanding of time the films (for them) historically exhibit cultural marks either from Japanese aesthetic considerations

(Burch) or as a particularized usage of Western conventions that promote certain ideological perspectives (Davis, 1996; Bordwell 1999). Both camps provide closely reasoned and materially exacting evidence for their positions. However, to explore the films as product/producer of national discourse, it is important to view the films not only as indicative of contemporary political and cultural influences or a structural system inherited from Hollywood, but as part of the larger discursive dynamic because they are, to use Nishitani's term, 'interpolated' by space/time. Such a viewpoint does not ground criticism primarily in the object/subject but awakens us to their relational presence, their shifting, associative emptiness.

Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Christine Ramsay says something analogous about the relationship of art and life that argues a different type of dialogical interplay than that of Darrell Davis:

For Bakhtin, art cannot possibly be understood as abstracted out of life – as pure art, or art-for-art's sake, or the property of the genius of the atomistic unconscious. If it's in art, it's in life, so that in our thinking about art, art can only be located *in life* as it participates in the value- and meaning-making potential of human existence as a dialogic intersubjective field of co-beings in co-consciousness...

Without the aesthetic and ethical consummative activity of the I-for-the-other and the other-for-me that enables us to experience ourselves as *whole embodies consciousnesses in the field of intersubjectivity*, we either (narcissistically) turn the consummative energy of form-giving activity back onto ourselves, or mistakenly fuse with the other, and so suffer the pathology of doubling.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Christine Ramsay, "Dead Queers: One Legacy of the Trope of "Mind Over Matter" in the Films of David Cronenberg," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 8.1 (Spring, 1999): 50.

Ramsay's essay is attempting to 'recontextualize' Bakhtin's views – grounded as they were in the socialist context of the 1920s Soviet Union – to perform a feminist and queer cultural critique of straight white masculinity. Yet it is interesting how appropriate Bakhtin's ideas are for a spatial theory perspective on Japanese cinema. His understanding of intersubjectivity, while transhistorical *and* tied to a socialist political agenda, resonates with the Kyoto School's similarly transhistorical concept of consciousness; though the ideological import of the Japanese thinkers is clearly less explicit and (I have been arguing) bounded by *nihonjinron* concerns.

I have utilized Ramsay (as she has Bakhtin) here partly because her italicized emphasis on *intersubjectivity* opens the sometimes hermetically sealed discourse on film. Yes, the films are intertextual, they reflect/embody textual influences from a host of filmic and non-filmic sources, but it is imperative to understand that they are not ultimately bordered. The films arise out of a cultural moment but also enter into one. To lose sight of this movement is to sacrifice the cinematic experience to a one-sided argument. Japanese films embody indigenous impulses and Western (and international) elements but they are subsumed within a greater discursive space rich in meaning and possibilities. If, as I am arguing, this space is characterized as encircling time so that a bordering, a nation can be maintained, this still, ironically, only represents a particular a historical (temporal) moment. The defusion/diffusion of the temporal is central to the postwar reassertion of the nation after the devastation of the war. The films do no less.

While I am venturing forth on a different track, I remain indebted to the critiques and critical approaches espoused by Bordwell, Burch et al.; rather, it is a strategy to pull in another direction to open up the field of possibilities in the critical discourse upon Japanese cinema. I am cognizant of -- though will probably still succumb to -- the 'orientalist traps' that await any analysis; thus I want to note Peter Lehman's advice at the end of a wonderfully titled essay, "The Mysterious Orient, the Crystal Clear Orient, the Non-Existent Orient: Dilemmas of Western Scholars of Japanese Film:" In it, he writes that we "need not only continue reading Japanese films in ways that are interesting to us with our various ideological spaces, but also to be aware of how far we still are from a reading of Japanese films which neither reduces and trivializes the role of the culture in understanding the films, nor obscures through Orientalizing the role of

culture until everything is turned into stereotyped “essences” of Japanese character and religion.”<sup>121</sup> I have chosen mostly well-known films that are easily available, but also varied enough to pursue these hypotheses from various angles. I hope they are not merely dry, supportive expositions of the argument, but a way of setting into play a ‘carnavalesque’ atmosphere.

Joy Hendry, in a small work entitled *Wrapping Culture*, uses the common practice of elaborately wrapping and giving gifts in Japan to make a fascinating ethnographic argument about presentation and the importance of enclosure (as in separation and the importance of unveiling something hidden from view). Gift giving in Japanese culture is pervasive – there seems no moment that cannot be marked with a simple gift. The gift is always dutifully wrapped in beautiful paper and formally presented. Depending on the occasion, the gift will be carefully opened in public or private, but mostly in private. What really matters, Hendry argues, is not the gift, but the whole process of wrapping and presenting. Each gift is a wrapped secret, elegantly separated by its thin paper from the eyes of the world, but presented as part of an on-going ritual of social exchange. The object opened, unveiled loses its power for it is exposed. The real delight is often the beauty and complexity of the wrapping and what it may or may not reveal about the reason for the gift. The films come to me this way and I can only trust you will accept the readings of the films in a similar spirit.

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<sup>121</sup> Peter Lehman, “The Mysterious Orient, the Crystal Clear Orient, the Non-Existent Orient: Dilemmas of Western

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### Women on the Edge: *Early Summer* and *Life of Oharu*

*Tadao Sato, the erstwhile Japanese film critic, casually observed in the chronological appendix of his collected essays that “Ozu directs Late Spring (1949), a masterpiece on the peaceful life of a middle-class family that makes audiences feel for the first time that peace has finally come to Japan.”<sup>122</sup> This is a comment that can be applied to nearly all of the director’s post-war films; thus while I will only focus on Early Summer (Yasujiro Ozu, 1951), it is a sentiment that seems applicable.*

*Upon its release, the film was a critical and box office success, eventually winning the “Best One” award in the Kinema Jumbo annual poll of Japanese films. Made in the closing years of the Occupation, Early Summer has a number of the Ozu regulars (Chishu Ryu and Setsuko Hara, for example, had starred in Late Spring) playing remarkably similar roles.<sup>123</sup> At first glance, it does seem that Ozu was remaking the same film over and over again. The story of the dissolution of the family in postwar Japan – particularly through the marriage of the daughter – became an obsession for a director who had previously worked in a number of genres*

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Scholars of Japanese Film,” *Journal of Film and Video* XXXIX (Winter, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>122</sup> Tadao Sato, trans. By Gregory Barrett, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, Kodansha International (Tokyo: 1982), p. 256.

<sup>123</sup> The similarity extends primarily to the fact that Hara is the daughter. Here Ryu is the older brother (and a sort of pseudo father). There are enough differences in character and motivation however to warrant a closer examination. As Noriko, Hara is a much less responsible, even somewhat westernized, certainly urbanized young woman. She is equally strong-willed, but here it is her actions (her impulsive decision to marry a widower who is being posted far from their home) that lead to the ‘break-up’ of the family; whereas in *Late Spring* it is her father who has to trick her into marriage.

during his long career.

*For me, Ozu's postwar films primarily attempt to stabilize the world of his characters. This stillness, most apparent in his refusal to move the camera – not always true in that there are a number of tracking shots at key moments in Early Summer – has ideological as well as spiritual implications. But as my work shows, the two cannot be so easily separated. Conversely, Ozu is at once a fussy realist and a strangely modernist stylist who flattens the emotional reactions of the characters (which ironically makes them appear more natural, more 'real' in their 'everydayness', but uncommon in their relation to 1950s Japanese codes of acting), plays hide and seek games with the narratives while at the same time deepening the mise en scène in an almost pure Bazinian mimetic act of self-effacement.*

*Among Western scholars of Japanese film, the debate still rages about the meanings of the various stylistic choices that Ozu made. I am not going to enter completely into this dispute, but want to note two critics in passing: Donald Richie writes that "Ozu's method, like all poetic methods, is oblique. He does not confront emotion, he surprises it. Precisely, he restricts his vision in order to see more; he limits his world in order to transcend these limitations. His cinema is formal and the formality is that of poetry, the creation of an ordered context that destroys habit and familiarity, returning to each word, to each image, its original freshness and urgency. In all of this Ozu is close to the sumi-e drawing masters of Japan, to the masters of the haiku and the waka. It is this quality to which the Japanese refer when they speak of Ozu as being "most Japanese," when they speak of his "real Japanese flavor." <sup>124</sup>*

*It is this kind of overdetermined and impressionistic cultural analysis, among others (the*

other seminal critic here is Noël Burch), that David Bordwell objected to. Hence his book on Ozu (1988) that attempts to demystify/demythologize him; indeed, to point out the American influences in Ozu films. Bordwell would later use his work on Japanese cinema to argue for a formalist methodology that sees classic American cinema (or 'classical narrative') as being a standard from which filmmakers like Ozu deviate; but which still holds them in its formal gravitational sphere. His analysis of *Early Summer* is plagued by a formal concern – “*Early Summer is an apt test case, for here a predominant stability of structure and style sets off various decenterings and autonomous patterns of variation*” – is Bordwell’s introductory comment on the film – that excludes any greater awareness how the film relates to Japanese society.<sup>125</sup>

For a quick summation of the varying critical perspectives on Ozu’s films, it is useful to read Kathe Geist’s essay on Ozu’s postwar films. She notes that “Noel Burch, dazzled by the spatial/pictorial inventiveness of Ozu’s early films, has called the late films a “final fossilization” of his style, their imagery and diegesis “a senile mannersim.” David Bordwell admires Ozu’s artistry in all its guises but calls Ozu’s subject matter “banal.” He classifies Ozu as a “parametric” filmmaker, one whose “stylistic patterning splits away from the [plot].”<sup>126</sup>

Whereas Ozu wants to stabilize the world of his characters, Mizoguchi traverses the landscape, taking us from a spatially and temporally ‘real’ world to one of dreams and fantasies.

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<sup>124</sup> Donald Richie, *Ozu* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), p. xiii.

<sup>125</sup> David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 116.

<sup>126</sup> Kathe Geist, “Narrative Strategies in Ozu’s Late Films,” in *Reframing Japanese Film: Authorship, Genre, History*, eds. Arthur Noletti, Jr. and David Desser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 73. My own particular analysis is closer to Geist; though I am more concerned to explore the ideological implications of his work.

*Two important films from the 1950s – Ugetsu Monogatari and Life of Oharu (1952) – move in circles and flashbacks, narratively and visually. Mizoguchi's characters are tragic yet hopeful (Ozu's comic - in a deadpan way - but ultimately sad, stoic). Life of Oharu is a picaresque downward spiral through the strata of Japanese society, an emotional crash and burn with a measure of Voltairean and Sadean relish in the suffering of the heroine. There's a touch of Douglas Sirk in the melodrama as well. Whereas Ozu's contemporary stories lament the past, Mizoguchi's historical sagas yearn to escape the past. It's the nihonjinron discourse from two opposing combatants.<sup>127</sup>*

*The parameters of this analysis are such that a general summation or complete exploration of the works of either of these filmmakers will not be attempted. However, a recognition of some of the critical reception will be a backdrop against which these particular films can be analyzed. The aim is to meditate on these two films – made within a couple of years of each other – in regard to what their spatial and temporal structures reveal about the larger social and cultural canvass.*

The opening shot of the seashore with the low mountains in the background is a typical Ozu establishing shot. Not for its content, but because it does not appear to have any relation to the rest of the film. It's only near the end when two of the central characters visit this beach that

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<sup>127</sup> Allow me to let this broad generalization stand. Whereas the point about Ozu could probably be defended, Mizoguchi is a much more eclectic filmmaker. The comment makes sense in the context of the two films under discussion, but there are simply too many exceptions in the work of both directors for any one-line summation. This is often the risk inherent in any comparative analysis, but I hope that there is much to be gained in regard to an understanding of the relationship of cinema (and directors) to the concept of national cinema. It is important to approach both *auteurs* in this manner as past analyses have tended to treat them primarily as Great Directors, with the cultural and political landscape as a backdrop against which they can be viewed. By inverting this process – to some degree, I do still remain largely indebted to the books on both directors – I hope to gain a fresh perspective on their work.



the locale reveals any significance, or relationship to the main setting of the film. Even then it functions more as a nearby location that the family may occasionally visit than the bearer of any symbolic intent. Given that Japan is an island nation where most of its citizens live near the sea would apparently be the location's only import.

That, perhaps, and what the spectator may press upon it. Indeed, the second – and last time – we see this location, the lives of the characters have changed and Ozu films this beach with a crane and later tracking shot, techniques relatively rare in the Ozu oeuvre. By then the weight of the narrative makes the long shot of Noriko – the film's central character – rife with meaning. Noriko stands, with her back to the sea, a smile on her face, calling her sister in law to come and walk with her; this at a time when Noriko will soon marry and move away from the family. She is a young woman perched on the edge of her new life, optimistic, happy, brimming with self-confidence and conversely, anxiety. Conscious of what she will leave behind – her actions will signal the dissolution of the family unit – but aware that this is her fate. That inevitably she must move forward as the waves must reach the shore.

This reading, subtly encouraged by the plot and seemingly underlined by Ozu's camera work (a beautiful craning up of the camera on the two women walking on the beach introduces this scene – the only crane shot I have ever seen in an Ozu film), is not one that need be made. It's not even certain that this is the same beach as the opening shot. Or that this process of naturalizing – of suggesting that the choices the characters make in their lives have the authority of nature, of something timeless, determined, the way the world is – the actions of the characters (and by extension the society at large) is what is being portrayed here.

This reading is my choice. And in some respects this is what fascinates (the Western

viewer?) in the Ozu film. The freedom to assign meaning, to make connections in a cinematographic process that literally brims with a Bazinian conception of the authenticity and undisturbed space for the meanings of the image; yet, in its narrative ellipses evoke a sense of mystery, of otherness that is beyond easily comprehended notions of naturalism.

In fact, one could take this analytical approach further. Set in 1951, Noriko, played by the very popular film heroine, Setsuko Hara, the perennial 'good girl' of Japanese cinema, is representative of not only the post war reconstruction (and this is near the end of the Occupation as well), but of a relative calm and prosperity that Japan would begin to enjoy in the 1950s. Thus she is a figure of her time: an effect that is implicit in this kind of realist construction. (The film as a whole – and other Ozu late-period films – bears comparison with neorealist cinema; in particular the work of Vittorio de Sica.) Yet despite the realist style – especially in the carefully constructed domestic/office/restaurant sets, the naturalistic, or at least fairly even lighting scheme that tones down any melodramatic elements, the even pacing, etc. – Ozu's minimalist style has a differing relation to Western modes of realism. He is, instead, evocative rather than explicit, giving the audience a visual representation of the real, but denying any direct and immediate notions of causality, linearity and closure, much more any overt psychological or sociopolitical reading. Although the films realistically portray the lives of an everyman family seemingly situated in a wider (and typical) social reality (of work and play), these domestic dramas are mostly bathed in a nostalgic light. That the films do not descend into something bathetic – sentimental, manipulative, simple-minded – is part of Ozu's genius. What we have, instead, is a carefully constructed space that evokes two paradoxical reactions. On the one side, the still, low-angled camera records a space that is a series of faithfully reconstructed (mostly

domestic) interiors and mundane location exteriors that give a feeling of peace and calm (doubly enforced by the avoidance of melodrama, the flat lighting, the predominance of medium and long shots, the direct, mostly unemotional acting style, a subdued atmosphere in general). Thus despite the Occupation, the preceding years of war, destruction, the upending of Japanese social, political and even physical institutions, the (Japanese) world is back to normal. The everyday drama of peoples' lives has not been altered. Life, in other words, goes on. On the other hand, the narrative drive of the film(s) elicit from the viewer a sense of loss, that what we are watching is a drama of the dissolution of what is being so lovingly preserved on the screen.

Perhaps because I am an outsider, I am more sensitive to this, but I tend to watch Ozu films with a kind of anthropological awe, not quite astonishment, but a bemused sense of otherness; that what I am watching is complete unto itself, culturally distinct. I believe the world of the film: the lack of obvious melodrama, the self-effacing 'look' of the *mise en scène* further seduces me into this acquiescence. It is only later, upon reflection, that I begin to suspect the authenticity of these family portraits and wonder about what is absent from this precise social construction. My wonderment is compounded by the overwhelming sense of loss and sadness that characterizes the ending of his films. I awake from the films somewhat startled at how I arrived here.

The answer to this (if you will) enigma of arrival might indeed lie with the erratic, temporally dislocating nature of the narrative. While the surface calm entices the viewer into a stable, peaceful world, the interruptive narrative works in the opposing direction. *Early Summer* affords many examples of this process, as do other films from Ozu's late period. One notable instance that will help to illustrate this idea occurs about halfway through a fairly long comic

scene that hinges on Noriko's brother, Koichi, pestering his wife (Kumiko) to ask Noriko whether she is intent on marrying the supposedly well-off, though older (and never seen) Mr. Manabe. The whole scene is set up for Kumiko to subtly question Noriko while Koichi pretends to be asleep in the next room. Yet at the moment she promises to do his bidding the scene ends. A cut (what else?) takes us to the next day and another plot line.<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, what is remarkable about the narrative is how the main plot line (Noriko's marriage) is constantly interrupted by the other stories. A short list of these is interesting because it suggests how these stories are linked to the central plot and will be impacted by Noriko's marriage, but are not tightly contained by this central narrative thrust:

- 1) The arrival of the uncle, his questioning about when Noriko will marry, and the offer of his house as a future home for the parents. A subset of this is the mother and father's discussion of whether they have had happy lives, along with their sadness over the loss (disappearance) of their son Shuji during the war (this being the only plot line that makes any mention (as usual indirectly) of the wartime past.<sup>129</sup>
- 2) Koichi's plans for the family in his capacity as the future patriarchal head, his work as a doctor – it is he who instigates Yabe's new posting up north – and play (a game of Go

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<sup>128</sup> Actually it can also be argued that the 'interruption' of the scene is significant in that the cut takes us not only to the following day (or even a week later? Who knows for sure in this film?) but to a scene with Mrs. Yabe – the person who will eventually propose to Noriko on her son's behalf and be accepted. Thus in editorial terms the audience, if not Koichi, has been given her answer.

<sup>129</sup> Partly this can be accounted for by Occupation edicts that proscribed most references to the war for fear that it would incite people to criticize the present American/Japanese regime, but also because it might inflame nationalistic tendencies. However, this oblique approach is also characteristic of Ozu and of this film in particular. A significant related example of such displacement processes would include the wedding procession we see at the end of the film that stands in for Noriko's marriage, which we do not see.

that seems to be his only relaxation).

- 3) The lives of Yabe and his mother and daughter. As neighbours they have had a long friendly relationship with the family. All show up at various moments in the plot almost as peripheral characters until the moment when Yabe's mother suggest that Noriko marry her widowed son, and she (surprisingly) accepts.
- 4) Ayako (and her mother), Noriko's best friend who is also linked to Noriko's boss (Mr. Satake, who also is arranging a prospective groom for Noriko) by virtue of his being a customer at her mother's inn, and their friends. A number of scenes are devoted to Noriko and Ayako and their friends. The increasing split between the four girl friends is hinged on the marriage of two of them.
- 5) Koichi and Kumiko's two young boys and their desire for an extra set of toy train tracks leads to their frustration with their father and them 'running away' from home. This plot line is the only one that exists, for the most part, independent of the marriage story; yet climaxes in the broken bread (symbolic of the divisions within the family) and results in Noriko seeking out Yabe and him helping Noriko find the boys (though this is never explicitly stated in the narrative, it is Yabe's mother who reminds them to look at the train station where it turns out they are).
- 6) Noriko's marriage: As can be seen above, this plot line is in many ways played out through the other stories, but also is explicitly its own story. The first part of this story concerns the desire of the family to find Noriko a husband, then becomes a question of whether she is interested in Manabe – Mr. Satake's friend who seems a wealthy, urban though somewhat older prospect – and finally revolves around her sudden decision to

marry Yabe over the objections of her family, her reasons for doing this and her final fear that she has effected the break-up of her own family.

Ozu constantly flit between these stories, playing one off against the other; though it must be noted seldom in an overtly dramatic or juxtaposed fashion. The ultimate threat to the cohesiveness of the family is Noriko's impending marriage (and it is impending even if the groom remains undetermined until near the end), however even as it begins to reach a climax it is pre-empted by the disappearance of the children. In fact, this story is given greater dramatic significance through the build up of their discontent, the dolly into the broken bread that they have thrown unto the floor and kicked and the matching tracking shot to the boys by the seaside.

Narratively, there is a weaving of stories that interrupt each other, constantly delaying what must be the central story to the point where one begins to question whether the film is about Noriko's marriage and perhaps more a broader saga about the dissolution of the family; Noriko's marriage merely an important theme of this break-up. Culturally, such a notion is reinforced by the fact that – especially at this time – very little occurs in an individual's life independent of the family or other social relations. Therefore Noriko's marriage cannot be realistically presented unless it is intimately tied to the family's narrative.

As the plot develops, these interruptive gestures have another effect. They reveal a director who is as discrete in his revelation of motivation, closure, etc. as Noriko is about her choice of marriage partner. Ozu simply plays a game of hide and seek, of displacement (one story, such as the boys' disappearance or the wedding party at the end of the film, standing in for the emotional impact of another). He is almost reluctant to tell the story, preferring to suggest as

much as express. We are like Koichi stuck behind the screen waiting for story revelations that never quite come; or that arrive only in retrospect, slightly displaced.

Such ambivalence is a kind of courteousness as well as a narratively involving structure. Combined with the abruptness of the cut – coming as they do at what may seem inappropriate moments – Ozu's reluctance appears self-censorious, often teasing, as if he is too polite to spell matters out, or, perhaps, simply evasive; that he is indulging in a playful social discourse with his audience. The shifting from one unresolved scene to another (though not strictly adhered to) charms as often as it frustrates. Thus it is here in these temporal elisions that his films seem most 'Japanese' – a kind of suggestiveness characterizes the narrative that leave temporal gaps (I want to say spaces in the narration) in the story that must be filled in (read, intuited, contextually understood both inside and outside of the film itself) by the audience.

The overall effect undermines the spatial calm; not as a violence but as a suggestive disruption. One sees these stable images – these nostalgic images of family stability, these architecturally bordered spaces that the camera's low-angle emphasizes by giving us even ceilings that act as another frame in the film – as dissolving. The result is a low-level anxiety, as we know, in a fateful way, that this apparent solidity will end. Or is in the process of passing away. The idea of *mono no aware* or resigned sadness therefore arises from this spatial-temporal play of the film.

Thus the paradoxical effect: The visual presentation emphasizes domestic calm, spatial order (we could probably draw a map of the family's home). The camera uses the architecture of the traditional Japanese house to hold its inhabitants within a deep focus frame. Hallways, doorways, the half-opened screens serve to further underline the intimacy of the family. They are

often seen together within a single shot. Even when there is not a group shot (and in the cinematography of the house these predominate), a medium-long shot of the individual maintains an awareness of the frames within the house. Repetition of these shot constructions serves to deepen our sense of the cohesiveness of the family and immutability of their world. Yet, of course, it isn't. Against this spatial integrity is the temporal game constantly undermines the narrative. At one crucial moment in the narrative, for example, when the mother, Kumiko and Koichi have been together discussing Noriko, she arrives home. The long shot shows their reaction by having them all evacuate the living room. Nothing is said. No close-ups are shown. Noriko's presence (off screen) disrupts. They scatter leaving an empty space. This not only emphasizes the importance of the *mise en scène* to the lives of the characters, but also reveals how the temporal unfolding of the narrative affects our understanding of the visual construction. It looks implacable but in actuality is in the process of being dismantled. The consequence of Ozu's loving attention to the detail of the set and his cinematographic desire to maintain its integrity versus his narrative disruption is that the film becomes a type of nostalgic reverie: A remembrance of things past. A loving recreation of something that its maker knows has passed (or is in the process of passing). Just to pick up on some of my own terms here, space is linked to immutability, to tradition, to family, to harmony and order. Time is the carrier of change, of disruption, what Noriko, the all too modern girl, will unleash upon this sacred space.

Ozu mourns this passing, without bitterness, only regret. If there are vestiges of anger in his attitude, they are usually sublimated into the closing strategies of the film. Rather than show Noriko's wedding or her in her new home, he will focus instead on her parents in their 'new' abode, the uncle's traditional house in the country. The kids can do what they will; they are no



longer part of the spatial configuration of the house. They are edited out.

The narrative results in the break-up of the family (and, importantly, it does not mean “breakdown”), the dismantling of the spatial domain, but Ozu’s presentation of this process is often played out visually as the removal of the child. Thus there seems a fragile spatial victory over the temporal elements, a triumph of nostalgic yearning over the harsh forces of the times. Yet what is nostalgia but a desire for what was (or what one imagines was); a reassertion of the beauty/greatness of the past against the rush of the present/future. An overlay. A forgetting.

These films are not meant as evocations of the past. *Early Summer* and all the Ozu films of the 50s are contemporary dramas. It’s just that they seem, even in the year that they were made, as nostalgic. As a mourning for what is being lost. What heightens this effect is ultimately what remains outside of the text. These interior sets, the famous ‘pillow’ shots (those sometimes seemingly random (dis-establishing shots) and even the exterior shots relevant to the location of the characters are seldom as time-specific as one would imagine they would be. Ozu’s characters exist in a world that is contemporary, but not specifically so. There is an element of timelessness (in fact, given that the past never quite disappears from our present, one could shoot an Ozu-like film now using the same locales without losing a sense of the contemporary). What is missing but the social realities of the times? The spatial configuration permits only enough modernity to remain realistic. The world of the film – its visual presentness emphasized by the lack of dissolves, of any permeating of the wholeness of the image – is characterized by a lack as well as a sense of completeness. What I am describing as nostalgia may in fact be an underlying anxiety of what has been excluded, but haunts the text. The postwar disruptions of Japanese society – especially during the years of the Occupation – are simply not present. Thus what we are seeing

is a 1950s Japan that does not in fact exist. This realist illusion is so complete, however, that we (or I?) yearn for it to be true.

To complete this conservative and exclusionary scenario, the temporal disruptions must themselves be tamed. Narratively, *Early Summer* is characterized by repetition and displacement. The outcome is, as I have been arguing, to heighten the sense of nostalgia. My favourite example of this is only vaguely related to the central story of Noriko's marriage; but certainly representative of the overwhelming sense of loss that distinguishes Ozu's late period films. In an early scene, we learn that the family's older son, Shuji, was lost in Manchuria. The father says he has given hope of finding him, but that the mother still listens to the broadcasts listing the identified war dead in hope of learning the fate of her son. A second scene with the parents alone on an outing has them discuss whether they have had happy lives, whether they should be content with their lot in life. This scene concludes with them seeing a balloon floating free in the sky. The father comments that there must be a child somewhere crying (for the loss of his balloon). This acts, in a sense, as an indirect reference to their lost son. However, a later scene, at the height of the family's concern about Noriko's choice of marriage partner, alludes to the greater theme of loss with even more subtlety and depth. The father, who is rendered mute through much of the family fight/discussion with Noriko, announces that he is going out to buy birdseed. As he walks down the road, he must wait for a train to pass. He sits down. We see the train pass by in a long shot that visually positions him literally under the wheels. The first symbolic reading would suggest that he (and the generation that he represents) is being crushed and/or being left behind by this speedy, modern train (one, presumably, that his children are

aboard). Yet the idea does not end there. The next shot, a medium-long one (close by Ozu standards), shows him looking wistfully up at the sky. A cut shows us his point of view: an empty sky. Is he merely lost in his own thoughts? Or does he yearn for the lost son? At this juncture, it seems to me that this empty sky reminds the viewer of the earlier scenes. That the repetitious/displacing nature of the narrative structure, its subtle, yet carefully drawn plot incidents, evoke a strong nostalgia within the fabric of the film not only at a visual level, but in the act of storytelling.

Gilles Deleuze offers an alternative reading in regard to Ozu's temporal strategies. Utilizing an earlier film, *Late Spring*, he postulates a postwar cinema less inclined to slavishly adhere to the "movement-image" (a traditional, classical-narrative strategy that focuses on character movement and match-cutting thereby 'masking' the movement of time in the films) and, because of Ozu's influence, willing to experiment with a "time-image" (one that in its 'irrational' and non-narrative thrust, expresses time more directly). This image of the empty sky, though motivated by the father's gaze, works as a kind of time-image, one less tied to narratively advancing the story. For Deleuze (this is an extrapolation since he does not discuss this scene), the length of the shot (and perhaps even the whole sequence), its arbitrary nature, would suggest that Ozu is attempting to express something beyond the pale of ordinary time (or life, or merely the diegesis?). Instead of nostalgia, there is the direct articulation/experience of time. Indeed, Deleuze sounds a lot like Nishitani: he writes that this direct time-image "gives what changes, the unchanging form in which the change is produced." Thus it is beyond comprehension, not mere nostalgia but a reaching for some future possibility always beyond our reach, it is, he adds,

“a matter of something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful, and henceforth outstrips our sensory-motor capacities.”<sup>130</sup> Deleuze’s reading of time in Ozu’s films becomes closely aligned with Paul Schrader’s idea of “Transcendental Cinema” because his argument is denuded of any larger political or historical context. My own interpretation is to suggest that these philosophical speculations and possibilities in the work of Ozu (and Mizoguchi, though from a vastly different style) is one element that underlies the nationalist ideology of postwar Japan.

Despite these temporal ‘interruptions,’ the central narrative thrust of the film remains Noriko, however, and as the principal agent of change, she must be tamed. To better discuss her and explore the relationship between time and space, narrative and visual strategies, it is instructive to view Noriko in relation to Oharu, the heroine of *The Life of Oharu*.

Whereas Ozu’s heroines resign themselves to their fate – or even choose their fate in the case of Noriko – Mizoguchi’s women battle theirs.<sup>131</sup> Instead of aligning themselves with the expectations of a patriarchal society, deemed natural/inevitable in Ozu’s world, Mizoguchi’s women embody the crushing of female desire and an exposition of the price of failing to uphold/follow the dictates of the patriarchy. No matter what consideration or solicitation Oharu makes, whatever sacrifices she offers up in terms of her dreams and aspirations, she can never achieve the stasis, the balance of individual desire and public expectation/acceptance that characterizes the Ozu heroine.

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<sup>130</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 17-18.

<sup>131</sup> *Life of Oharu* may be the most representative example of this idea; however *Ugetsu Monogatari*, *Naniwa Elegy*, *Sansho the Bailiff* and *Street of Shame* among others also provide varying degrees of confirmation of such a

Noriko exists in a place – her family and their home – that is under threat of dissolution, a threat that apparently rests upon her choice. Yet her decision to marry and move away offers up the distinct possibility of the reassertion of a similar structure within the confines of her new home. There is much sadness and nostalgia at the passing of the family unit, but no real sense that the system itself is unfair or hypocritical or, worse yet, in need of reformation. The final shot of Noriko, her head down, crying by herself, suggests the burden of guilt she carries in precipitating the splintering of the family, but whereas she chose a husband against her family's wishes, she still would have had to marry and move out. The family break-up was always in the cards and family members do not hold her responsible; indeed her 'choice' was not whether to marry but whom she would marry. Her tears then may be tears of sadness for what was inevitable, but also for the anxiety of separation, the fear of whether her new life will give her the kind of security and comfort she seeks in marrying Yabe.

Ozu's portrait of the traditional familial system showcases its compassion and latitude. It admits that times have changed -- epitomized by Noriko's independent decision -- but corrals this within an unchanging patriarchal system.

Made a year after *Early Summer*, *Life of Oharu* is markedly different in tone. Unlike the stillness of the Ozu diegesis, Mizoguchi's camera is constantly exploring (tracking, panning, probing) the world of his heroine, in the process unveiling layers of patriarchal vulgarity, injustice and brutality. Oharu's prolonged, relentless fall from grace serves as a coda for the hypocritical male world and the roles women are forced to play within it. Indeed, we see Oharu in a series of roles – court lady, courtesan, mistress, daughter, mother, maid, wife, novitiate nun,

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position.

prostitute, beggar, itinerant monk – none of which can satisfy her desires or, conversely, allow her to be accepted within the hierarchic and chauvinistic environment of late 17<sup>th</sup> century Tokugawa society. In some respects, the film is about her inability to find a position in the society. Oharu cannot have spatial satisfaction.

Told for the most part in an extended flashback, *Life of Oharu* begins with the fifty-year-old Oharu as a common street prostitute. Oharu enters a temple that contains hundreds of statues of Buddha and sees in the face of one statue the image of her one true love, Katsunosuke. In a series of medium-length reverse shots between Oharu and the statue, including two dissolves that superimpose the image of Katsunosuke onto the statue, Oharu, we are led to understand, begins to reminisce about what she had earlier called her “lost life.” The angle of the final shot in this scene is from the point of view of the statue, looking down on the visibly moved Oharu. A dissolve takes us to the imperial court in Kyoto where Katsunosuke, a soldier of lower social rank, pursues Oharu, a noblewoman. She resists his advances, at first, but soon falls in love thus instigating her downfall. The imperial guard catches the lovers, Katsunosuke is executed and Oharu and her parents are exiled from Kyoto.

Oharu’s exile becomes a picaresque tale as she moves through the strata of Tokugawa society. Specifically, it is a downward spiral, from one degradation to another; much like Voltaire’s *Candide*.<sup>132</sup> Sold by her father to the Matsudaira clan (who are based in Edo, the old

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<sup>132</sup> Max Ophul’s *Lola Montez* also comes to mind; though, less like Lola, Oharu’s sexual power – passive and burdensome – is portrayed as the means of her destruction. Both films use the female protagonist as a narrative device to explore a male-dominated world. However, I think the unrelenting pace of Oharu’s ruination and her lack of power (her only real power may be in the fact that she is the instigator of the flashback, but even this is undercut by Mizoguchi himself who maintains a kind of distance from her reminiscences) may be closer to Voltaire’s heroine. Somewhere in between: *Candide* without the banal innocence (and Voltaire’s narrative condescension) and *Lola* without the more openly expressed sexual desire.

name for Tokyo) to serve as a concubine, she bears Lord Matsudaira a son, but the child is taken from her and she is unceremoniously evicted from the household by the Lord's jealous wife; at least this may be the implication, the ostensible reason is that, because his love for Oharu is growing, she is "draining the life" out of Lord Matsudaira. Because of her father's mounting debts, Oharu is forced to work as a courtesan (though she seems more a geisha/prostitute) at an inn in Shimabara on the Western shores of Japan. Fired from this job (partly for being too "proud"), she becomes a maid. After fighting with the mistress of the house (in a fit of jealousy at the attention her husband was paying to Oharu, the wife had cut her hair – Oharu, in turn, exposes the fact that the wife was essentially bald). Oharu next finds refuge as an assistant in the shop of an elderly couple. Here she meets Yakichi, who loves her in a way that Katsunosuke had espoused, purely and without concern for rank or her past. They marry, and there is a brief respite in Oharu's tragic life where she seems to have gained a measure of respectability, but some thugs soon murder her husband. In desperation Oharu becomes a kind of novitiate nun, but is caught in a compromising situation with Jihei (the husband of the woman who had cut off Oharu's hair). Oharu is once again expelled (in an emotionally charged scene before casting out Oharu, the head nun asks: "Did you think I would join you?"). She briefly runs off with Bunkachi who has been fired by Jihei for stealing money from him. However, Jihei's men, who call Oharu a "consummate whore" as they push her aside, catch him and Oharu is reduced further to begging on the streets. Older and impoverished, she catches a brief glimpse of her son, now a boy, being carried through the street. Crying, she is befriended by some prostitutes who adopt her into their profession. This leads to the penultimate scene that concludes the flashback. Oharu is invited by an old man, perhaps a monk, whom she believes is interested in her services.

Instead, he makes Oharu show her face to a group of young men on a pilgrimage as a means of instructing them on the sinful and ephemeral nature of the material world. As she walks away, the film comes back full circle to its opening shot. From here the film progresses chronologically to its denouement. Oharu is found by her mother, who tells her that her father has died and that her son (now the head of the Matsudaira clan) would like Oharu to come and live at the palace. When she arrives there, however, his advisers declaim Oharu's past and will only allow her a brief look at her son as he passes by. This Oharu does, but then runs away from the court attendants who worry that she will actually approach her son. A fade takes us to the final scene where Oharu is a veiled monk going, door to door, begging for food. She turns and bows to a temple off in the background.

Even through such a brief exposition, the essential melodramatic elements of the plot are clearly visible. Life for Oharu is, indeed, harsh. Her world is characterized by betrayal, jealousy, the concern for a male-defined code of honour versus real sympathy and compassion. Whether it is the authorities or rules at the Imperial court, or the internal politics of the Matsudaira clan or even the behavior of merchants and commoners, the events of Oharu's life are determined by the unjust and exploitative actions of men. The women – in particular Jihei's and Lord Matsudaira's wives – who betray and hurt her, appear to do so to maintain their own fragile positions within the patriarchy. Oharu herself remains relatively unchanged: Proud, as befitting the daughter of a samurai, yet dutiful, both to her father and the ideal of true love

Yet, in contradiction, change is what is most obvious in Oharu's life. As the film progresses, her father disappears from the narrative and, at the end of the flashback we learn that he has died (regretting, according to her mother, his actions in regards to Oharu). Thus many of



the transformations in status that Oharu undergoes in the latter half of the film may be as much due to her own choices as that of the men in her life (in particular, her decision to take revenge on Jihei's wife, to marry, to seduce Jihei). As such, Oharu's tribulations are not always visited upon her by men. She has some control over her own life, albeit within an oppressive patriarchal structure that cares not one whit for her desires or expectations. I dwell on this because Oharu is much more than a narrative device with which to critique an insensitive male world. She is more complex, something seldom acknowledged in the critical literature. Her pride and willingness to acquiesce to the demands of her father and Katsunosuke are balanced by her strength, desire and perseverance. She struggles against her fate and the few scenes we have of her at the beginning and near the end of the film when she speaks with her sister prostitutes suggest she has won a hard-edged wisdom. Oharu's character, however, does begin to point to a greater political and spiritual complexity in the film; one that needs exploring not only in terms of plot, but in Mizoguchi's celebrated visual style.

From a purely sociopolitical perspective, Oharu's itinerant life is marked by the institutional and individual actions of men. Her exile for a love affair with man of lower rank is the direct result of not only class but also chauvinist laws (no such rules would prohibit a man of high rank from making love with a woman of lower rank). Visually hierarchic positioning is enforced in a number of scenes that serve to underline power relationships in the film. Vertical patterns –mostly dependent on who is higher/lower in the frame by virtue of either being in the forefront of the image or through one character simply standing while the other kneels or sits – often visually enact the particular social dynamics of a scene. It is immediately apparent in the

crucial sequence showing Katsunosuke and Oharu's love affair. The first scene begins with Katsunosuke pleading with Oharu to consider him a sincere suitor. He is always lower in the frame than her, either kneeling or standing below her as she paces the raised platform of the inn. When she starts to give in to his pleas, she descends to the ground, briefly standing equal with him until she finally succumbs and admits that she shares his feelings, in which case she falls to the ground in a faint. The subsequent scene-- in which Katsunosuke and Oharu are caught by the court police -- concludes with Oharu literally standing up to the policeman to proclaim her high rank. The next scene begins with a slightly high-angle long shot behind the judge. He is in the foreground with Oharu and her family sitting in the background, seemingly hovering over the official. But as the sentence of banishment is read out, a closer medium-long shot of the family then a reverse angle shot takes us behind the family with the judge now in the upper part of the frame: the triumph of the Imperial law over the desires of mere humans? Such patterning suggests a conscious use of vertical relations to express the status-minded world that Oharu will slowly but inextricably fall through.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, the completion of the vertically patterned exposition of Katsunosuke and Oharu's romance may be the downward stroke of the sword that ends Katsunosuke's life. Here again Katsunosuke is kneeling, the camera follows the rising of the sword, stays on the executioner's face and sky as he beheads Katsunosuke then follows the sword in a downward pan after it has completed its task. Imperial justice has been rendered, a justice that literally comes down from the sky. While acknowledging that Mizoguchi, depending

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<sup>133</sup> The ensuing one-shot scene of Oharu departing Kyoto with her family follows a similar, though not exact mode. The camera, below the bridge across which the family walks, tracks and pans to the right so that we see them start at the top of the frame but turn and slowly disappear into the background along a downward slope. This magnificent shot expresses not only the effect of the exile but forebodes the entire course of Oharu's life.

on the particular film, employs traditional Japanese aesthetic practices, Tadao Sato is at pains to defend him against charges of being old-fashioned; which he says was common among Japanese critics in postwar Japan. Instead, Sato argues, Mizoguchi's camera can be characterized by sympathy and a traditional gracefulness.

Unlike the dynamic, rhythmic movements of European dance and ballet, Japanese dance emphasizes the beauty of shape, for the dancer momentarily holds a certain pose or gesture. These movements are called *kimaru* ("form resolution"), and in moving from one to the next, the body changes its balance in a smooth, flowing manner. Similarly, Mizoguchi's one scene, one cut technique is sequential motion; motion changing from one exquisite shape to another. Short cuts cannot possibly capture this subtle, relentless flow, which can only be caught by complex camera movements like panning and craning. Thus, far from being static, Mizoguchi's long one cut is filled with visual restlessness, interspersed with interludes of breathless anticipation for, even as we watch, the structure of any single scene is always in the process of dynamic transformation.

Doubtlessly, the aesthetics of Japanese dance are deeply related to the Buddhist notion of society and human life being in constant flux. Reality can never be grasped firmly, it changes from moment to moment.<sup>134</sup>

Sato believes that other Japanese directors attempt to represent similar Buddhist ideals in their work, but only Mizoguchi knows "how to distill its essence – its tenaciously spiritual core – through the one scene, one cut technique."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Tadao Sato, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, trans. By Gregory Barrett. (Tokyo: Kodansha Press, 1987 paperback ed.), pp. 181-182.

<sup>135</sup> Tado Sato's interpretation of the scene of Katsunosuke's execution is different and more detailed but worth mentioning; To illustrate this idea, Sato focuses on the execution scene in *Life of Oharu*:

There is an overall shot of the place of execution, enclosed within a bamboo fence. Then the camera lingers on the full-length figures of Mifune [Toshiro Mifune, the great Japanese actor who plays Katsunosuke], bound and kneeling, and his executioner, squatting in the background. After Mifune shouts his last words ('May there come a world where love is not a crime'), the camera

Mizoguchi's vertical framing is naturalistically emphasized in *Life of Oharu*. However his over all camera movement – the virtuoso pans, tracks, dollies and cranes – is much more self-consciously intricate. The one scene/one take style has attracted commentary from every critic concerned to explore the style of his films; particularly in regards to whether they represent examples of a traditional aesthetic. Sato is certainly not alone in making associations to Japanese arts, in this case, dance and *Bunraku* puppet theatre. Others (Andrew and Andrew, 1981; Davis, 1996; Richie, 1971) have stressed the correlation of *Kabuki* theatre, scroll paintings, or simply a generalized Japanese pictorial quality that is non-Western and imbued with a Buddhist sense of life's constant flux. James Quandt summarizes some commonly held accounts of Mizoguchi's style when he writes that if there is a debate about the source and meaning of Mizoguchi,

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leaves his face to pan up to the executioner's sword, held aloft with water dripping off it. A tilt-up pan of the sword follows and then the camera freezes. The movement is comparable to a stroke in calligraphy, when pressure is applied at the point where the moving brush stops. It is similar to exhaling, and the camera freeze elicits this sensation. In the next instant, the sword flashes down without a sound, but the camera remains immobile, staring out into space.

Unwaveringly, the *kimaru* moment has been resolved. Later the sword moves back into the empty frame. The executioner, having finished, now holds aloft in his left hand. The sword lingers there a moment, as if the executioner is stilling his own breathing, agitated by the execution. Then, as he slowly begins to lower it, the camera follows in a downward pan, which is the end of this long shot. In the final pan down, the camera seems to be hanging its head in profound sadness. In this manner, Mizoguchi's camera moves, stops, then moves again, thereby evoking moods as subtle and various as those produced by a Japanese dancer as she moves her arms, legs, or neck. *Ibid.* pp. 182-183.

The shot of Katsunosuke's execution does not play out exactly as Sato describes it – the camera pans down to Katsunosuke as the executioner rests the blade momentarily on his neck to line up the stroke, there is the sound of the executioner's shout as he strikes and the camera shot does show mostly sky, but with the executioner's head in the bottom corner of the frame – but he does capture the overall sense of intricacy in the camera movement. On the other hand, the claim that the camera “seems to be hanging its head in profound sadness” seems a bit overdone. More to the point is that Sato attributes to the camera, not only the figures in the frame, what he calls *kimaru*. And that *kimaru* is linked not only to traditional aesthetic notions but also to a religious understanding of time.

“If there is debate about the source and meaning of Mizoguchi’s themes, there is little about his style, one of the most sublime in all cinema. As with all great art, his style can be parsed but ultimately explication must give way to the ineffable: one can come away from his films exhausted from their beauty. The key components of his style: elegant long takes and sequence shots, reflecting Mizoguchi’s one-scene/one-take method; deep focus compositions that organize background and foreground to energize the space contained in the frame, and employ strong diagonals to emphasize offscreen space; intricately planned pan, crane and follow shots that earned him comparisons to such stylists as Murnau and Ozu; and a propensity for the long shot – “I hate close-ups,” he said. In two famous instances – *UGETSU* and *SANSHO* – the camera moves away from his characters to the landscape, its movement indicating transcendence (and transience), where a similar gesture by another director might suggest decorative indifference. (Mizoguchi critics prone to abstraction suggest that his camera style collapses time and space a manifestation of Zen aesthetics – thereby offering us a vision of “wholeness and unity,” a glimpse of infinity.”<sup>136</sup>

Without denying the fruitful and insightful nature of these critics, I would like to explore one affective and simple aspect of Mizoguchi’s visual style that relates to matters of time and space: in the scenes utilizing a single or even a few shots, the camera seldom repeats a shot. Space is effectively denied any kind of solidity that would affect the viewer in a way that Ozu’s cinematography would. Without an alternating pattern of cutting that accentuates the frame, but with a kinetic camera moving through the space, the stability of the diegesis is continually undermined. The enforced calm of Ozu’s stable camera, the reliance on a simple cut and the repetition of camera set-ups serve to maintain the integrity of the space; as opposed to the motion, dissolves and fades that distinguish Mizoguchi’s. Given that the cinematic image is already a ‘motion picture,’ the camera traversing a landscape (mostly following characters who are themselves moving) and that the narrative is essentially a picaresque tale seldom revisiting a particular locale, *Life of Oharu* embodies a temporal threat to any spatial arrangement; as does its heroine (the ‘consummate whore,’ the ‘life draining’ concubine, the representation of ‘life’s ephemerality,’ etc.) to the patriarchal order to which she is subjected. As such, the one constant

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<sup>136</sup> James Quandt, “Mizoguchi the Master,” *Cinematheque Ontario Fall Programme Guide*, Fall 1996, p. 4.

in the film is Oharu herself, both as subject and (ostensible) narrative controller of the flashback. She – her character, her desires, her evolution – is the central element of the film, bearing prime responsibility for its dreamlike, destabilized world. Robert N. Cohen, in an essay entitled “Why Does Oharu Faint? Mizoguchi’s *The Life of Oharu* and Patriarchal Discourse,” utilizes Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist perspectives (particularly the work of Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey) to question the commonly accepted notion that Mizoguchi is a ‘woman’s director’ whose work investigates the effects of an oppressive patriarchy on the lives of women. He argues that Oharu’s flashback is a case of ‘misrecognition’ or a kind of hallucination brought on by her unresolved feelings of guilt. That Mizoguchi, using off screen space – often filled with male voices and reverse angle point of view shots, but mostly the ‘presence’ of the ‘absent one,’ Katsunosuke – and a distant, sometimes independent camera (independent of the protagonist, that is) exhibits Oharu as an object of desire even as we understand that these are her memories. Cohen writes that, for Oharu,

Katsunosuke becomes her ego ideal, which is a position in the actual chronology of her life that should be taken over by her father. In the logic of her “distorted” memory, however, Katsunosuke is substituted for her father, and his loss comes to represent her failed search for happiness, pleasure and identity. Oharu’s flashback, therefore, must represent her Oedipal journey, and its chronological distortions signify the fact that it remains unresolved. Her memory takes on the force of a defence in which Oharu projects all her neurotic fears onto Katsunosuke. The social wrongs that plague her throughout memory become projections of her own internal fear that she has been wronged. It is this anxiety concerning Oharu’s unresolved Oedipal conflicts, as well as her fear of being castrated, which threatens her at the conclusion of the flashback and which motivates her fainting. Her defense is unsuccessful, however, for as Freud commented, “with the return of the repressed in a distorted form, the defense has failed.”.... Oharu’s narration thus seems disease-producing, while at the same time it is contained within a controlling discourse which “contains and regulates” it. It therefore combines both functions. Her fainting after the flashback confirms her illness, while the signs of the patriarchy within

the discourse suggest how it is being controlled.<sup>137</sup>

Cohen is never as clear as he should be on this issue, but stemming from his psychoanalytic perspective, he argues that Mizoguchi's distancing and subtle disavowal of his heroine is crucial to an understanding of the patriarchal nature of the film. He therefore concludes that since "women do exist in Mizoguchi and in Japan, but remain, at least in *The Life of Oharu*, representations of lack and desire, they are subject to procedures of disavowal which elevate them into symbols of suffering and beauty. Beautiful but lacking, whole yet fractured, women in Mizoguchi signify the fundamental misrecognition at the heart of the director's patriarchal discourse."<sup>138</sup>

Though I find the psychoanalytical apparatus brought to bear on the film a little forced and culturally insensitive, Cohen's concentration on Oharu and Mizoguchi's relationship to his heroine a fruitful area for discussion. Thus it is somewhat surprising that Cohen's elaborately reasoned position, supported by Doane's analysis of desire in the text and Mulvey's equally insightful commentary on the scopophilic nature of the male gaze, to be so sparse in its description of the cinematic processes that serve to undermine the verity of Oharu's memory. Cohen is arguing that if Oharu is truly the mistress of her own memories, then the 'looked-atness' of the flashback would necessarily stress what she sees. Instead, what we have is Oharu, particularly through the distance from her as subject and also the reverse angles that situate her as the 'looked-at' object. Thus inscribed within this section of the film (and it is the bulk of the work) is a male gaze, rather than Oharu's. This gaze, Cohen seems to suggest, is primarily

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<sup>137</sup> Robert Cohen, "Why Does Oharu Faint?" in *Reframing Japanese Cinema* ...pp. 48-49

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

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in the film is Oharu herself, both as subject and (ostensible) narrative controller of the film. She – her character, her desires, her evolution – is the central element of the film, bearing responsibility for its dreamlike, destabilized world. Robert N. Cohen, in an essay entitled “Does Oharu Faint? Mizoguchi’s *The Life of Oharu* and Patriarchal Discourse,” utilizes Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist perspectives (particularly the work of Judith Butler, E. Ann Douglas, and Laura Mulvey) to question the commonly accepted notion that Mizoguchi is a ‘woman’s director’ whose work investigates the effects of an oppressive patriarchy on the lives of women. He argues that Oharu’s flashback is a case of ‘misrecognition’ or ‘hallucination’ brought on by her unresolved feelings of guilt. That Mizoguchi, using the film’s space – often filled with male voices and reverse angle point of view shots, but without the ‘presence’ of the ‘absent one,’ Katsunosuke – and a distant, sometimes independent (independent of the protagonist, that is) Oharu as an object of desire – helps the audience understand that these are her memories. Cohen writes that, for Oharu,

in the film, Katsunosuke becomes her ego ideal, which is a position in the actual character's life that should be taken over by her father. In the logic of her “distorted” life, however, Katsunosuke is substituted for her father, and his loss comes from her failed search for happiness, pleasure and identity. Oharu’s flashback, therefore, represents her Oedipal journey, and its chronological distortions signify that her remains unresolved. Her memory takes on the force of a defence in which she projects all her neurotic fears onto Katsunosuke. The social wrongs that plague her memory become projections of her own internal fear that she has been sexually abused, anxiety concerning Oharu’s unresolved Oedipal conflicts, as well as her fear of being castrated, which threatens her at the conclusion of the flashback and with her fainting. Her defense is unsuccessful, however, for as Freud comments on the repressed in a distorted form, the defense has failed.”.... Oharu’s illness seems disease-producing, while at the same time it is contained within the patriarchal discourse which “contains and regulates” it. It therefore combines her illness with fainting after the flashback confirms her illness, while the signs of the



story upon which the film is based and the Tokugawa era social milieu within which the film is set, provides a different understanding that is worth noting.

*The Life of Oharu* closely follows the Saikaku narrative *Koshoku ichidai onna* but changes its title to *Saikaku ichidai onna* [Japanese title]; a revision from, literally, “Lust: one woman’s life” to “Saikaku: one woman’s life.” This ironic insistence on the connection of the film to its source all the more rejects the eroticism of the writer’s original term *koshoku*, as it consciously revises his picaresque program. Oharu’s unlustful image, by its gentle persistence and unfailing integrity, overcomes the episodic structure of *ukiyuzoshi* narrative, a structure which fragments the textual Oharu into a lexical component without subjectivity. Saikaku’s *picara* in *Koshoku ichidai onna* is a creature of language, she can only re-tell her tales to male listeners, to entertain them with words as she has entertained other men with her body. Mizoguchi’s Oharu is an envisioning subject: she *re-imagines* herself, literally pictures herself for herself and for no inscribed listener or viewer. The brilliance of this adaptation is that it is faithful to its source in every way but ethical impact. Saikaku’s cynicism surrounds the filmed Oharu but can never degrade her, as it does in the *genroku* novel, because it cannot invade her face, her body, her mind. She is as inviolate psychologically as the temple where the memories of her humiliation at the hands of others unfolds. She is a sanctuary for the images her narrative reproduces. She *represents* herself. Oharu’s memory de-eroticizes the filmed image to expose the pornography of the written word. Mizoguchi subverts the very story he presents to overthrow the authority of the writer he seems to uphold in the film’s title.<sup>139</sup>

Between Cavanaugh’s claim that Mizoguchi subverts patriarchal discourse and Cohen’s inverse reading, I want to draw attention to *Oharu* as a contemporary ‘text’ and its ideological implications. The one extended sequence that does not directly feature Oharu concerns the Matsudaira vassal’s search for the perfect woman, as described in a list provided by his superiors. The crowning shot of this sequence is a one-take scene, the camera slowly dollyling backwards as the men search among a throng of women, a multiplicity of potential Oharus. It evokes the interesting doubling that is a feature of the film: Oharu is both subject and narrator and the film is both a realist text and a dreamlike interior journey. *Life of Oharu* – fifty years on

– still teases the viewer with the complexity of its contradictory, orchestral harmonies. The transient nature of the text – Oharu's transient life, the picaresque tale, the perpetual movement of the camera undermining the stability of the diegetic space, the resolution or at least completion of the narrative that suggests the ephemeral nature of reality itself and (Buddhist) transcendence – investigates the social order through Oharu, paints a devastating portrait of its venality and cruelty, but can only suggest a final self-banishment (the life of an itinerant monk) as a suitable resolution to the suffering and internal contradictions (of the heroine and the society).<sup>140</sup>

Unlike many first person narrative structures (though certainly not a rarity), Oharu is not given sole privilege to her story. She is bordered by events that precede her flashback and the final ten minutes of the film that 'resolve' the contradictions of her life that have arisen in the course of the flashback. This narrative 'bordering' serves to contain Oharu's potential (temporal and moral) disruption of the patriarchal order/world in which she finds herself; but also underlines the tragedy resulting from any attempt to disrupt this social order. Indeed, if the common Buddhist conception that life is suffering holds, Oharu's final role – the wandering/begging monk – offered as a transcendent figure in the landscape (mute, veiled, visually indicative of someone seemingly beyond desire and desiring), serves to uphold the social order. The tragedy of Oharu is that she has failed to accept her assigned role in a society where no rebellion is possible. From a hierarchical perspective, the perspective of the historical times in which the film is set (and, one could argue, the early 1950s in Japan), Oharu could be

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<sup>139</sup> Carole Cavanaugh, "Unwriting the Female Persona in Osaka Elegy and the Life of Oharu," in *Mizoguchi the Master*, Cinematheque Ontario Monograph (Fall, 1996), p. 65.

seen as slightly insane, selfish, unable (incapable?) to adapt herself realistically, pragmatically to the 'natural' limitations and customary observances that shape Japanese society. In fact, her 'madness' would be most obvious in her fidelity to Katsunosuke's romantic and unbending, ultimately futile and inept adherence to notions of equality and pure love. Given such a viewpoint, the religious 'resolution' may be the only one allowed because transcendence also functions as an acceptance and acquiescence (typical virtues that permit wisdom in the Asiatic world) of the social order; even as it denies 'what is' as having any true, eternal veracity. What is, is natural, and freedom from its restrictions comes only through personal growth and change, not from any serious questioning of the social order or revolutionary action. The only solution is retreat from an unbearable world altogether. Yet even here in the brief concluding scene of the film, Mizoguchi adds a heartbreaking touch: as Oharu begs at the door of two houses, a woman with a child at her hip gives Oharu something, at the other door a man shoos her away. Even in the strange mystical space that concludes the film, men are no help whatsoever.

This 'religious' reading of the film can further be buttressed by returning to the early scene that instigates the flashback. The reverse angle shots between Oharu and the statue of a Buddha (with the image of Katsunosuke superimposed over it) could be read as the statue being the instigator of the flashback; as if the events we will witness are part of a spiritual examination of Oharu's life and the society around her. Thus the narrative resolution – Oharu as itinerant monk – follows logically as a decision on her part to retreat from the material and sinful domain of mankind; a traditional Buddhist solution for the illusory world of suffering.

Bearing in mind these disparate thoughts about *The Life of Oharu*, it is instructive to

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<sup>140</sup> Cavanaugh sees this 'banishment' as an escape from the gendered, and thus oppressive, roles: "it is the creative

return to a strictly spatio-temporal analysis. Oharu represents a threat to the male-dominated world, not only in her desirous and questing personality, but also in that she is associated (though not strictly a controller of it) with the temporal structure of the film; in particular, the flashback that comprises the bulk of the text. Oharu's power arises from the steadfastness of her ideals (a desire for mutual love and respect in a classless world) and the fact that the film, for the most part, is sympathetic and cooperative with her perspective. The cinematographic apparatus further serves to enhance her position in the narrative through certain vertical framing strategies; but even more explicitly the constant mobility of the camera disrupts the solidity of the diegesis, threatening to unmask, ideologically puncture the entrenched stasis of the chauvinist society. Together, the roving camera and picaresque narrative provide a dual temporal threat to the spatial representation, constantly destabilizing any image of authority, of patriarchal comfort. In the same way that Noriko in *Early Summer* is the agent of change and destruction of the family home, Oharu represents a threat down through the layers of Japanese society.<sup>141</sup>

'Threat' is much too strong a term, however, for Oharu's tragic, "lost life." She is hardly as dangerous or powerful as the cinematic strategies suggest. What power she possesses is primarily sexually passive. She tempts men (and incites jealousy among women) simply by

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negation of old alternatives, the only valid reply to systems that offer nothing for women to affirm." *Ibid.*, (p. 65).

<sup>141</sup> The fact that Mizoguchi's camera maintains enough distance and seems to be always framing and re-framing the particular location of a scene, effectively keeps the viewer alert to the social parameters of Oharu's world; even as it evokes a dream-like atmosphere. At a narrative level, this dreamy (lyrical? fantastical?) world is ultimately folded into the 'real' world of Oharu – her life as an ageing prostitute. Thus there is a spatial embrace of the temporal ordering of events represented by the flashback. The most famous example of Mizoguchi's stylistic practice in this regard is the moment when Genjuro in *Ugetsu Monogatari* returns home to an empty house. He walks through once, the camera, observing him through a window, follows him in a pan, but as he enters the house a second time his wife and son are there, the house is now a home. Mizoguchi concluded the flashback in *Life of Oharu* with the same type of cinematographic/narrative strategy; though here the fantasy bleeds back into reality, not vice versa.

being, and by being open to persuasion. Hence, if my suggestion that Oharu may not be in complete control of her own story (the memories contained in the flashback) but that the events of her life could be seen as a kind of religious examination of her life, the resolution amounts to a kind of grace for Oharu -- a spiritual release from the everyday cruelties that characterize material existence. The ideological consequence of such a resolution to the 'problem' of Oharu's life bears repeating for it is a crucial aspect of the patriarchal parameters of Oharu's world. On the one hand, Oharu is not so much a threat as a means of expressing the essential sadness and suffering to be found in life; its injustice, its fleeting moments of happiness, the inevitable thwarting of desire and the emptiness of desire itself.<sup>142</sup> Her desire propels her through a bleak and unforgiving social landscape that cannot be altered; that always reasserts its authority and power. The only acceptable solace is the (literal) veiling of desire, perpetual exile, the donning of a spiritual robe that protects against the wiles of an authoritarian, self-serving male domain; and, pointedly, does nothing else to challenge it. In fact, by providing a non-threatening escape, the film's resolution functions as a means of ensuring the survival of the social structures it critiques. Thus the bracketing provided by the opening and closing scenes of the film are crucial in that they contain -- barely -- the temporal dynamics of the flashback. Indeed, structurally, the film begins as a straight line that curls upwards and back onto itself, like a giant loop de loop, before continuing straight to its conclusion. The temporal threat to spatial stasis can only be redeemed by a religious acceptance of the suffering that is life itself. Rather than espouse any ideological

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<sup>142</sup> Mother/Women films in Japan, sometimes called 'Ha Ha Monos,' often enact this emotional and ideological strategy. Women become the locus of suffering, agents of social critique, but rather than instigating any radical change, they absorb the vicissitudes of life. They drink from and are representative of this 'vale of tears,' thus providing an emotional catharsis for the audience.

position that would ultimately question or confront the social order, the final sequence, in particular, can only muster a feeling of pathos at the hard lot of women (and men) in a patriarchal and class oriented society. And though the narrative interrogates the whole spectrum of the society, the viewer is sufficiently distanced from Oharu (indeed even entertains the idea that much of her tragedy is of her own making) that her final banishment – which seems self-determined and thus can be seen as a choice that finally allows her some measure of dignity – has a moral and spiritual force that mostly absolves the unjust society that has been primarily responsible for her tragic fall. It may be the film's genius and Mizoguchi's subtlety that *The Life of Oharu* holds these opposing ideas in an unresolved and captivating tension. Even if one is tempted to read the final moments as performing an ideological closure in accordance with the prevailing patriarchy, the dynamism of the spectacle, the tremendous visceral effect of the cinematography haunts any pat or religiously sanctioned ending.

Whereas *Early Summer* laments the sadness of life's everlasting flux by creating, for the most part, a stable, realist diegesis that is slowly dissolving away in the harsh light of post-war Japan, *The Life of Oharu*, a dreamlike, traditionally mannered historical melodrama, permits a more devastating social critique. Seen beside *Early Summer*, the film's emotional power and ideological ambivalence seems more open to the times than the tightly controlled, almost guarded nature of Ozu's text. Yet both films, in the end, retreat – to the countryside in the former and to a mystical dream space in the latter – to sometime/somewhere 'elementally' Japanese: A place where post war confusions can be accepted as part of life's mysteriousness and harshness; and thus resolved.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### The Postwar War: *Harp of Burma* and *Godzilla*

*These are two war films that are not really about war. Harp of Burma (Kon Ichikawa, 1956) is World War II through the hazy glow of a Buddhist desire for peace and reconciliation. It is Grand Illusion as told by the Japanese. WW II becomes an object lesson for spiritual growth, denuded of the blood and tears of actual history. It is one of the most offensive and spiritually uplifting films ever made.*

*Ichikawa is the last of the great quartet of Japanese directors who gained widespread international recognition in the 1950s (Kurosawa, Ozu and Mizoguchi being the others). His career spanned the mid-1930s to his latest film, Dore Heita (2000). Famous titles include: Pu-San (Mr. Poo, 1953), Enjo (Conflagration, 1956), Fires on the Plain (1959), Kagi (The Key/Odd Obsession, 1959), An Actor's Revenge (1963), Alone on the Pacific (1963), Tokyo Olympiad (1965), I am a Cat (1975) and The Makioka Sisters (1983).*

*Shane Danielson writes that "Ichikawa was perhaps the most complex and, dare one say, most inscrutable [of the great Japanese directors]: a mix of humanist despair and savage irony; a master stylist whose visual genius is coupled with a profound empathy for the dispossessed, the marginalised, the lonely and afraid."<sup>143</sup> But what is equally notable about Ichikawa is the range of his films. James Quandt – curator of Cinematheque Ontario who has prepared a monograph on the director for the Museum of Modern Art – suggests some of the breadth of Ichikawa's work*

*While often referred to as a link between the 'golden age' of Japanese cinema and the New Wave of the sixties, Ichikawa has rarely been given his due as an innovator. He*

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<sup>143</sup> Shane Danielson, Film Notes, Edinburgh Film Festival, 2000

is an artist with an astounding command of many genres, forms, and tones, from ferociously humanist war films to sophisticated social satires, formalist documentaries to extravagant period pieces. His celebrated adaptations [with his wife and scenarist Natto Wada, and others] of famous Japanese novels by Yukio Mishima, Junichiro Tanizaki, Toson Shimazaki, and Soseki Natsume have earned him a reputation as a 'deadpan sophisticate' (as Pauline Kael wrote). Many of his films, which are full of gallows humor, revolve around tenacity and madness (often synonymous). Motifs of fire, snow, poisoning, and nuclear or apocalyptic anxiety define Ichikawa's world, as do his protagonists, most of them alienated, isolated, or obsessed outsiders struggling against implacable systems (family, army, Japan) or indifferent nature (as in *Alone on the Pacific*, 1963). One of Ichikawa's signature images replicates this engulfing, solitary struggle: a long shot of a lone figure in a vast landscape.<sup>144</sup>

Based on his animation work in the 1940s and social satires in the early 1950s (influenced, according to Ichikawa, by Chaplin and Disney), Richie argues that "Ichikawa was something like a miniature Preston Sturges, a small-time Billy Wilder, not nearly so good as either but funny enough at times."<sup>145</sup> But beginning in 1955 with *Harp of Burma*, there was a sea change in Ichikawa's work (heavily influenced, Richie, Tom Milne and others suggest, by his wife and co-scenarist, Natto Wada).

*This story of a Japanese soldier who stays behind after the war to bury the dead moved many of the director's generation when it first appeared as a novel. 'It said something simple and true about the difficulty of living, and I was beginning to find out just how difficult that is.' [says Ichikawa] In 1956 he read Mishima's The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, and it 'seemed to me to express perfectly the 'pain of our age.' I thought that here was something I could make which would really be all mine.' Enjo (Conflagration), based on this novel, is still his favourite among his films, and one of the reasons is that 'this picture marked the end of the change that was taking place in me.'*

*The jump from comedy to tragedy - particularly in Japan - is not as wide as commonly supposed, and one can reach comedy through tragedy (Kurosawa) or tragedy through comedy (Ichikawa), the latter turning from the most satirical of comedies to the most painful of analyses. 'I had become aware that men are unhappy. You can even say that they are in anguish and so the only way to show a real man is to show an unhappy one.'*

<sup>144</sup> James Quandt, *Monograph on Ichikawa*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001). Website: [www.moma.com](http://www.moma.com)

<sup>145</sup> Donald Richie, "Kon Ichikawa", *Sight and Sound* 35:2 Spring, 1966



*Oh, I look around for some kind of humanism but I never seem to find it. People are always complaining the ending of the Olympic film is an example - why show all that strain and pain, they say. And they want happy endings too. But doesn't this desire for a happy ending show how unhappy they really are?' <sup>146</sup>*

*Richie proceeds to divide Ichikawa's work into the Light/Dark, films that are funny and satirical versus those that are serious explorations of the pain and anguish at the heart of life itself. As well, he notes that Ichikawa's work has always been marked by a strong visual sense: "It owes much less to traditional art than it does to modern graphic design. The angular pattern is usually bold, the balance is almost always asymmetrical, the framing is precise, and yet the composition rarely calls attention to itself. Here the 'cartoon' influence is seen strongly, not specifically Disney but those animated films (UPA was an early example) which were designed by graphic artists."*<sup>147</sup>

*The overall impact of Ichikawa's oeuvre is that given the great number of films and television work he has accomplished over a sixty-odd year career, it becomes difficult to specify a particular world view or even stylistic consistency; other than these generalizations that he is a 'master stylist,' concerned with the diverse range of human experience, etc.*

*I have utilized these comments to fill in some of Ichikawa's career and to give a sense of the critical reception, but also, I must admit, to distance myself somewhat from the usual readings. Despite the great insight into a director's work that an auteurist approach generates, it tends to blind us to the particular social and cultural environment with which the film engages. The reading of the film revolves around a dialectic of consistency/inconsistency, visual stylist/grand themes. By stepping outside of these particular discursive procedures, I am*

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33

*attempting to see the film anew.*

*Godzilla King of the Monsters (Inoshiro Honda and Terry O. Morse) is another side of the war. I am primarily writing about both the Americanized version of this film, starring Raymond Burr, but with reference to the original Japanese production, Gojira (Inoshiro Honda, 1954). The replacement of scenes with a Japanese reporter for an American one does not significantly alter the narrative, but does radically open up the discursive possibilities of the text. Though I, for the most part, want to speak about the films as they relate to Japan, how they 'speak' Japan, Godzilla represents a Japan that has been filtered through an American studio. Which version matters? The original, which we can say is an unadulterated product of Japan? Or is this a misnomer in that such 'purity' really does not exist, and probably has never existed? In many ways, Godzilla points toward the future of Japanese commercial cinema, or is, already a manifestation of a Western system of cinematic representation. The ease with which the American produced scenes could be inserted into the text underlines how little cinematic difference there is between the two differing cultural systems.<sup>148</sup> Rather it may be more appropriate to discuss the political environment of the film. Godzilla himself (itself) is a floating metaphor, or one that has risen from the depths to avenge the cruelties that mankind has perpetuated against humanity and the planet. It is about the nuclear bomb, about the American occupation of Japan, about Japanese militarism. Godzilla (in the Americanized version) is subtly*

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33

<sup>148</sup> Actually, they do it poorly, but this is not to say the possibility of doing a better job does not exist. I will discuss the adaptation of the original film in the section on Godzilla.

*linked to Raymond Burr (who towers over the Japanese characters) who in turn is linked via his pipe to General MacArthur (who towers over his the immediate postwar environment).*

*Both Harp of Burma and Godzilla are interesting for how their temporal structures play a central role in the thematic discourse. But more importantly, it is interesting to follow the path of discretion the films tread. If Harp of Burma is a polite, religious version of the war that serves a didactic purpose, Godzilla is an equally forgiving and ideologically self-serving story of the bomb.*

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The Burmese Harp [different commentators translate the title this way] is a haunting, poignant and serenely indelible examination of the aftermath of war. The film opens with the spare, enigmatic words: *In Burma, soil is red, so are rocks*. Using landscape as a metaphor for the isolation and suffering of the soul, Kon Ichikawa contrasts the chaotic, harsh realities of war with the tranquil expanse of nature: the mountain fortress attack; the discovery of a body leaning against a tree in the jungle; the mass burial of soldiers along the shoreline. Symbolically, Mizushima's spiritual transformation is reflected in a scene where the troop assembles for choral practice at a religious site, as Mizushima rests inside the hull (the figurative soul) of a Buddha statue. It is a reflection of his own enlightenment and sense of purpose after witnessing a great and senseless tragedy - a transcendence beyond his spiritual captivity - towards a lonely, indefinite journey, guided solely by humanity and personal conscience.<sup>149</sup>

The narrative of *The Harp of Burma* opens with a shot of an empty vista. A title announces that “[d]own in Burma, the soil is red. So are the rocks.” An off-screen narrator (who, significantly, is not identified until the closing moments of the film) then introduces the story: “It is such a long time since the War ended. The War has left many indelible sad stories in our

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<sup>149</sup> [www.filmref.com](http://www.filmref.com) (Acquarello 2000) This quote, influenced by Donald Richie, Keiko McDonald and Tom Milne, is typical of the humanistic reading of the film. I include it here to show the popular conception of the film; one that I will contest, or at least contextualize.

hearts. The following is a story of our Company. A story we'll never forget." Through aerial shots of the landscape and the sounds of weapons and aircraft (not seen), the narrator informs us that these are the last days of the War. We see a tired, ragged Japanese Company trudging through the jungle. They are exhausted but not in desperate spirits. Their leader, Captain Inouye (Rentaro Mikune), is a former music teacher and, in order to improve morale and build camaraderie, he has taught the soldiers to sing as they make their way through the rough Burmese terrain. One soldier, Corporal Mizushima (Shoji Yasui), a self-taught musician, has taken to playing his hand-crafted harp and provides the accompaniment for the troop's singing. Throughout these early scenes, the soldiers sing songs of longing for their home:

*Autumn night that deepens  
Makes heavy the pilgrim's heart  
Thoughts go back afar  
To the bosoms of loved ones at home*

The song is used to accompany the soldiers as the trek through the jungle and mountains, tired and in retreat. As the company rests, Mizushima is sent ahead, dressed as a Burmese civilian, to scout the area. He takes his harp to use in signaling the all clear. Mizushima is robbed of his clothes – but not his harp – by some desperate locals, and has been reduced to wearing a skirt made of banana leaves when he is reunited with the others. They joke that he looks like a “cannibal.”

Arriving at a peasant village, the soldiers are treated to food and songs by the community. The Burmese sing:

*Himalayas snows  
Flutter through the clouds  
In it's melting waters*

*We cleanse ourselves  
Somewhere afar...  
Your hidden spirit  
Soothed in the waters  
This burning heart.*

Mizushima asks a native whether you can see the Himalayas from Burma. He replies: "Not from here. Sutras and folklore tell us the Himalayas are the Homeland of our soul. Our wish is to see it once." This conversation is immediately followed by a fellow Japanese soldier asking Mizushima whether he wants to stay in Burma, since he seems to have such an affinity to the place (evidenced by the earlier scene of him dressed as a native, his harp playing and ability to speak the local language). But Mizushima is emphatic: "I want to go home too." His friend answers "Ah, Japan." They both look off to their right, their heads slightly inclined up. A reverse shot takes us behind them so that the light shines down on their faces, in profile. It seems to strongly suggest that if the Himalayas is the spiritual home of the Burmese, Japan is the spiritual as well as literal home of the Japanese.

The captain, to thank his hosts, begins to organize his men to sing when they realize that British soldiers have been surreptitiously observing them. While preparing to fight and move a cache of gunpowder out of range of British guns, the soldiers sing "Home Sweet Home" to cover their actions. But just before hostilities are to begin, they realize that the British soldiers have joined in their song. The camera now alternates between the singing British soldiers, Mizushima who has picked up his harp and started to play along and the Japanese soldiers beginning to sing. Long shots of the village, the mountains, and the moon through the clouds now dominate. The music, diegetic and with a non-diegetic orchestra, swells as the narrator tells us: "The war had

ended three days before. We gave up our arms.” The scene fades to black thus completing the first extended sequence of the film.

A number of thematic elements are worth exploring at this juncture. Primarily, the end of the war is treated in an especially dignified manner that attempts to erase any shame or guilt associated with the actual events. The music is crucial in this regard - and indeed the film seems almost a musical in its numerous songs (often dissolved into non-diegetic use) and in the importance of music as a whole to the portrayal of characters and events – for it serves to show the Japanese soldiers not as brutal invaders, but as part of a respectful army operating in Burma. Their longing for home is seen as a desire common to all. This is given further spiritual significance when the Burmese sing of home as the abode of the soul. The Japanese corollary, as mentioned above, is to express this religious aspect as belonging to a specific place: Japan. But the sequence’s ultimate gambit, the surrender, is to unite the enemies in a chorus of song; one that transcends place or history. It is a powerful moment in the film for it recreates all too recent events within the postwar ideological framework; that it is a massive delusion or perversion of what the final days of the war were like still cannot undercut its desire to reinterpret the surrender and the birthing of the ‘New Japan’ within a humanistic and religious guise. There certainly would be many in the audience of the time (1956) who would be acutely aware of the ludicrousness of this cinematic moment. Yet they would also be – as we may also be now watching the film – afflicted with a desire to de-historicize the moment into a plea for tolerance and peace, for the acceptance of a common humanity beyond the mundane realities of violence and injustice that actually characterized the war in Burma. Rather than succumb to the actualities of the war, the whole opening sequence of *Harp of Burma* provides us with a war, and its

cessation, that is part of a myth making process instead of a historical evocation. It consciously avoids any overt scenes of violence, preferring to show the effect of war (and then, only the Japanese dead). Moreover, the shot of the clouds visually elides the moment of the surrender (is it too shameful?), though it is discussed in later sections of the film.

The 1950s Japanese public would hardly need to be reminded or explicitly shown the cruelties of war. The horrors of the battles throughout much of Asia and the American bombing of Japan – as we will explore in *Godzilla* – would be fresh in the mind of many. But, and this continues to the present in the sparse self-criticism of Japanese actions in the region, this horror is usually rationalized as part of the price of any war, or alternately, as a grand misadventure that caused suffering to the Japanese as much as to their victims. In Japanese cinema in the 1950s, portrayals of Japanese soldiers' aggressiveness and brutality remain few and far between. Kon Ichikawa's other great war film, made a few years after *Harp of Burma* is *Fires on the Plain*, is a notable exception. Based on another famous postwar novel of the same title, the brutality of the Pacific War – in particular the aftermath of the Japanese defeat in the Battle of Leyte in the Philippines – affects both the Japanese soldiers and the local population. James Quandt, in the Museum of Modern Arts program notes for the 2001 Ichikawa retrospective describes the film as

a work of appalling beauty and an apocalyptic vision of war's ravages and man's ultimate degradation. Private Tamura is a solitary wanderer, one of the few Japanese soldiers left who hasn't been killed or captured by American forces or Filipino guerrillas on the island of Leyte, the battleground on which the outcome of the Pacific War will be determined. The dead lying strewn across Ichikawa's infernal landscape seem fortunate, for it is the wounded and the abandoned who are left to fester and starve and who resort to eating human feces and even human flesh. But beyond these horrors was something perhaps equally unsettling to Japanese audiences (and readers of the 1952 novel): the idea that Tamura's true saving grace was his individual free will, an explicit condemnation of the

emperor's call for heroic sacrifice.<sup>150</sup>

As a dark companion piece to *Harp*, *Fires on the Plain* certainly does not shy away from exposing the brutal actions of Japanese soldiers toward the local populace and each other. Tom Milne, writing in 1966 on a ten-film Ichikawa retrospective, sees these two war films and his adaptation of a Yukio Mishima novel, *Enjo (Conflagration)* as revealing “a man obsessed by human suffering and expressing his pity through a series of long, slow, painful, humanistic affirmations. Ichikawa is obsessed by suffering all right, but he is not a humanist in any modern sense of the word ('I look around for some kind of humanism, but I never seem to find it,' he himself accurately observes).” Specifically, Milne then turns to *Fires* to delineate the finer points of, if you will, Ichikawa's stressed humanism:

Re-viewing a film like *Fires on the Plain* (1959) with the hindsight acquired by having seen another ten miscellaneous Ichikawa films, one is immediately struck by its central ambiguity. As Private Tamura turns from the stench of death in the plains, rejecting the final debasement of cannibalism to stagger resolutely towards the gentle plumes of smoke rising from the farmers' fires on the hills, one is tempted to agree with David Robinson that he is emerging from an inferno, and that 'Ichikawa's fires are those of purification.' And yet - purification of what? It is here that doubt sets in. By refusing the temptation of cannibalism, does Tamura expiate the relish with which he earlier murdered the Filipino boy and girl in cold blood (and in what sort of moral balance does one weigh the two crimes)? By throwing away his life, to preserve which he has gone through this inferno and for which he has lied, cheated and killed, does he somehow become more human? When *Fires on the Plain* was first shown in London five years ago, more than one reviewer reproached Ichikawa for his departure from the ending of the novel by Shohei Ooka on which the film is based. In the novel, Tamura ends up in a mental hospital, where he meditates on the meaning of his experiences and on the existence of a God who has guided him safely through them; in the film, he simply turns to the hills, towards 'people who are leading normal lives,' and is shot dead. The difference is an important one, and surely deliberate on Ichikawa's part. Ooka's ending is an expression of faith in man and in the possibility of spiritual progress. Ichikawa's is the exact opposite: his hero puts his trust in man, only to find that his 'people leading normal lives' are still vengeful Filipino peasants, full of hate and determined to avenge their sufferings. Ichikawa is too

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<sup>150</sup> James Quandt, Program Notes, *Museum of Modern Art*, 2001 (website)



honest (and too little of a mystic) to suggest that the repentance of a single sinner will bring rejoicing in heaven and restore the harmony of the spheres. At the end of *Fires on the Plain*, Tamura may possibly have become purified by his sufferings; what is certain is that the world around him has not.<sup>151</sup>

Milne's final comment is particularly relevant to *Burma* because that seems exactly the message promulgated by this film. Mizushima's sacrifice – his virtual death by separation from the homeland – is meant to move the heavens, to placate the conscience of the living through an honourable treatment of the dead. Whereas Tamura is unable to return home because of the blood on his hands, Mizushima equally must remain, but his actions allow others to return

The virtual absence of violence in *Harp of Burma* is structurally necessary for it allows the morality play to proceed without the messy business of history. The blood red soil of Burma is not a real (historical or geographic) place, but an existential field upon which the hero – Mizushima – will surrender himself to the teachings of the Compassionate Buddha. It is a stage upon which the morally instructive narrative will be played out. Upon closer examination, however, it is important to understand that Mizushima's spiritual journey is imbued with a strong nationalist sentiment; and a desire to counter the prevailing cynicism brought on by the defeat and social and economic tensions of postwar Japan. For despite the general critical understanding of the film as a humanist and religious text, one that enunciates a Buddhist sense of the universality and timeless nature of suffering, a more rigorous reading would suggest that it subtly (and beautifully) articulates an ideological position that was very much consciously promoted in the rebuilding of Japan after the war. Politics, as much as religion, or, how the two are intertwined, is what needs to be addressed in this film.

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<sup>151</sup> Tom Milne, "Kon Ichikawa," *Sight and Sound* 35:4, Autumn 1966, 42.

The other critical component of the film's opening section is the delineation of Mizushima's character. As well as being a gifted and natural musician (he plays simply by ear), he is a well-respected member of the team, depended upon as a scout because he looks somewhat Burmese and because he speaks the language. There is something honest and innocent about Mizushima; a trait underlined in the beautiful long shot of him – dressed in banana leaves playing his harp – in the forest, after he has his clothes stolen. This idyllic moment emphasizes Mizushima's purity and naturalness, traits that are ironically commented upon by his companions' joke about him resembling a cannibal. But it is through the harp that Mizushima's spiritual connection is best understood. Aside from Mizushima's use of the harp to sound the all clear or warning to his comrades and as an integral part of the group sing-alongs, he instinctively begins to play the harp to accompany the British soldiers singing. The harp is thus symbolic of universal harmony as well as Mizushima's own connection to a deeper spiritual resonance.

Mizushima's journey from Japanese soldier to Buddhist monk, from innocence to enlightenment is what narratively dominates the central section of the film. After the surrender, the company is ordered to Mudon where they will await their fate. Captain Inoue gives a speech to his troop that in many ways expresses the dilemma explored in the film:

We have surrendered, not only us, but our country too. I don't know what to think of this. We don't know where we will be taken, or what we'll have to do. Will they let us live? Our homes... Japan... People have been bombed, and destroyed. They are hungry. Our homeland is ruined. We are captured prisoners, thousands of miles away from home. We only have to await our fate. What use to fight against fate now? We had better acknowledge it honestly, and then heroically stand up again. Till now, we have lived and died together. Maybe we shall be reduced to ashes in this country. We'd died together...If fate would let us return to our homeland, We'd all go together and work for the reconstruction of Japan. That is all I can say at this moment.

Many of the soldiers weep as he speaks (and an English guard walks around the lined up

men, indifferent and uncomprehending, which serves to even further deepen the company's sense of tragedy and despondency). Unlike the others, however, Mizushima is given a special mission, to go into the mountains to convince another company to surrender before the British attack them. After this he is to rejoin his unit. Thus begins Mizushima's spiritual journey that will forever separate him from his comrades and his homeland.

Keiko McDonald argues that the novel (Michio Takeyama, 1946) upon which the film is based is

frankly didactic: to inspire youth, then facing the radical transformations in Japanese life, in the aftermath of the war, with hope in the future of their country.... [However], the effect of the film is to highlight and contrast three value systems that might direct the course of Japanese life after the war. Ichikawa represents these value systems by three character types: Mizushima; a new type of soldier; and an old type of soldier. To schematize the value systems, the protagonist, Mizushima, follows heroic altruism; the new type of soldier led by a captain fresh from a music academy acts upon individualism, and the old type of soldier led by a tenacious captain acts upon collectivism.<sup>152</sup>

Based on these character types, McDonald negotiates around the politics of the film by emphasizing its "psychological" nature. Drawing from Donald Richie's interview and article in *Sight and Sound* in 1966, she further states that "*The Harp of Burma* definitely illustrates Ichikawa's avid concern with "psychological revelations." First, it deals with a number of stages of perception that Mizushima experiences on the way to his final epiphany. Second, it concerns the long-sought discovery of his final mission that the new type of soldier reaches after various turns of events. Finally, it guarantees the audience's gradual initiation into a culminating revelation of cosmic tragedy."<sup>153</sup>

I find McDonald's prose a little confusing here, as if she struggling to carry the

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<sup>152</sup> Keiko McDonald, *Cinema East: A Critical Study of Major Japanese Films* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1983), p. 89.

weight of her argument. By accepting the existential values of the film, she can dismiss the 'old soldier' as one blindly following the old Emperor-worship paradigm to his death, but sees in the 'new soldier' the growth of a sense of individualism more appropriate to the postwar age. Mizushima then, stands in between the two because he sacrifices himself like the old, but for the sake of the new. Thus, ultimately, psychology explains away the politics and spirituality of the film, but in so doing, eliminates history as well. McDonald (and Richie and most of the commentary on *Harp of Burma*) steadfastly refuses to view the ideological ramifications of the film.

Mizushima's encounter is with a company that is the inverse of his own. Rather than accept the surrender, they believe that fighting to the death is the only honourable recourse; to do otherwise would be an insult to the Emperor and their fallen comrades. Unable to convince this troop to surrender in time, the British open fire and Mizushima is wounded, awakening only after the fierce battle has ended (we are again denied any direct representation of the fighting). He stumbles around amidst a heap of bodies and climbs out of the mountain cave in which they had made their last stand and falls in a faint down the side of the mountain. The camera fades to black and we are taken to Mudon where his own unit awaits its fate.

Captain Inouye's unit is stationed in a prisoner of war camp where they anxiously await news of Mizushima. They plead with an old Burmese woman who brings them food in exchange for what trinkets they have or can make to ask after the whereabouts of their comrade. The next day, however, while marching across a bridge they have spent their time repairing, they cross paths with a monk (with a parrot on his shoulder) who looks exactly like Mizushima. They call

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* p. 89.

out his name but he does not respond. Taking shelter in a house during a rainstorm, they discover that it is the house of the old Burmese woman. She tells them that the authorities have informed her that there were no survivors from the mountain assault. Despondent at this news, but equally shaken by the monk they have just seen, the soldiers are divided in their reactions. Some, such as Sargeant Ito (the second in command) hope, with a certain guilt and reverence for Mizushima, that he died fighting. However, Captain Inouye still holding out hope that Mizushima is alive, buys from the old woman a parrot that she tells him is the brother of the one her husband has given to the monk. The scene concludes with a close up shot of the bird on Captain Inouye's shoulder as the narrator says: "We could only believe that he [Mizushima] was dead."

A dissolve takes us back to images of dead Japanese soldiers and the mountain where Mizushima lies. It is a significant narrative turn, because it represents a flashback that will eventually bring us forward to the scene on the bridge. What has thus far been a fairly straightforward chronological accounting of events, loops back to fill in the information that has been missing. The film's temporal structure resembles *Life of Oharu* in this regard, but here the flashback (a much smaller though crucial part of the film) is used to delineate the spiritual and psychological motivations that result in Mizushima's decision to become a monk. At the same time, Mizushima's spiritual journey is effectively separated from the rest of the story as he is from the group. It underscores his alienation from his fellow soldiers while also revealing that his separation is a kind of sacrifice for them. However much this flashback remains the centerpiece of the film (and I believe it may be the enduring chapter of *Harp of Burma* that sympathetic Western critics most respond to), its culmination in Mizushima as a type of Bodhisattva, sacrificing his return to his spiritual homeland (Japan) so that others (the dead Japanese soldiers

scattered around the Burmese landscape, unburied and thus within Japanese religious traditions, lost in an eternal interregnum) is not the full story.

The flashback dissolve takes us to the mountain where under a full moon, an old monk discovers the dying Mizushima whom he nurses back to health. Once healthy, Mizushima repays the monk's kindness by stealing his clothes, disguising himself further as a monk by shaving his head and goes off in search of his unit. It is a fateful journey for along the way Mizushima, wandering a sometimes sparse and scorched landscape, stumbles upon hundreds of dead Japanese soldiers. He buries a few, but is overwhelmed. Arriving at a river, he once more meets the monk who bears him no animosity but lends him his boat to continue onto Mudon where his colleagues wait. Though shaken by these encounters, Mizushima plows ahead, arriving at the camp late at night. He puts up for the night at a monastery where he befriends a young boy who plays a harp to entertain the troops. The next morning Mizushima overhears singing and discovers a funeral service held by Christian sisters/nurses for a grave marked 'The Grave of the Unknown Japanese Warrior'. This is the final straw. Running back to his monastery room, Mizushima falls to the floor as a montage of images of death, of barren landscapes, of the monk, the Christian service visually express his inner turmoil. This is his moment of *satori*, if I can express it this way, for Mizushima is now forever changed. The personal, the spiritual and the national coalesce in this moment. The change that is effected in Mizushima is as much the result of the suffering caused by war, the Japanese Buddhist conception of the proper way to honour the dead, and a resilient nationalist pride that one must look after one's own. In fact, there seems to be a great sense of shame in that the Japanese corpses must reach their final resting place through the auspices of the former enemy. Their kindness only underlines Mizushima's guilt, a

particular Japanese guilt that was strongly felt in the postwar era for the unburied dead and those languishing in camps all over Asia. Mizushima's moment of conversion then is not only a personal awareness of universal suffering, but the birth of a purpose in his life: that he will devote himself to giving a proper burial to the Japanese soldiers lying strewn on the blood red soil of Burma.

Thus Mizushima turns away from the camp and begins to make his way back to the river, to embark upon what he sees as his new mission. He crosses the bridge where he must pass his fellow soldiers returning to the camp.... Here is the repetition of the scene that preceded the flashback. The film has come full circle. The narrator's voice succinctly clarifies: "The priest was Mizushima."

What follows is instructive as to the central theme of the film. For even as Mizushima is motivated by a religious injunction to ameliorate the suffering inherent in humanity, suffused as it with a dutiful nationalism (and I could say racial, given the degree to which self-identity in Japan is bound up with nation and race), the closing act of *Harp of Burma* is very much a drama of separation. The narrative alternates between Mizushima formally burying the Japanese corpses (we never see any others) and the poignant efforts of his colleagues to return him to the fold. It is not enough that Mizushima gain a measure of personal enlightenment and sense of purpose, but that his actions are meaningful within the context of the group.<sup>154</sup> It becomes apparent that the tragic nature of the film is not so much the inhumanity of war, but the devastating personal cost that the individual (in this case Mizushima) must suffer to uphold the

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<sup>154</sup> I will argue a similar point in regard to *Ikiru* where the actions of the hero, Mr. Watanabe, are ultimately only meaningful within the context of social utility. This strong sense of community, threatened in the aftermath of the

community's values. His suffering is that he must remain apart from his colleagues, his homeland; it is a tragedy of separation, but also a romanticized ritual of sacrifice. Mizushima is giving himself up to a cause – as did those who laid down their lives, especially in the closing stages of the war – even more than those who are returning to Japan must to its rebuilding. Here the didacticism of the film begins to come to the fore.

Two scenes in particular help to encapsulate these ideas. In what (to me) is one of the greatest cinematic images, Mizushima appears outside the barbed wire fence enclosing his comrades. He has a parrot on each shoulder, one (trained by Captain Inouye) that says “Mizushima come home,” the other “I can’t go home.” He is dressed in his monk’s robe, head shaven. The little boy stands beside him holding the harp. Behind him sits a Buddhist Stupa with a mist flowing through the trees in the distance. On the near side of the fence, the company, their voices hoarse from singing “Home Sweet Home.” They call to Mizushima. He responds by taking up the harp and playing a song of farewell. The camera, slightly elevated, gives us a long shot so that we feel that Mizushima is almost hovering above his friends. They are in the bottom part of the frame partitioned by the fence; he is above them, centered by the composition. It is an image of separation, but also of transcendence.

There is then the final coda. Before they board the ship that will carry the repatriated Japanese troops back home departs, we are given several shots (fairly long takes) of the shoreline, of the camp, that accent the mood of departure, of separation. As the ship leaves, the men sit on the deck discussing what they will do once home. Then over group shots of the men and images of the sea as the boat steams toward Japan, Captain Inouye reads a letter that

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war, would become an important theme, particularly in Japanese cinema and literature.



Mizushima has written to explain his actions:

I cannot leave the bones lying scattered on the hills. Why this awful tragedy? Why this terrible sorrow? As the days passed, I learned that the 'why' of tragedy was not for humans to know: That our work was to relieve the sufferings of the world. To have courage...to not fear... to have strength...I should like to train myself, so this will become my conviction. I have been accepted into the Buddhist priesthood. The Captain's words that we will return together to work for the reconstruction of the country are still fresh in my memory. However, once I saw so many dead men left in this country, I gave up his words. Here I shall stay, to pray for their souls.

This long speech is indeed an almost direct address to the Japanese public. At the end of the reading, we are finally given a medium-long shot of a group of soldiers and the narrator informs us that he did not much like Mizushima; though he has certainly been moved by his actions. But even here, we are not completely sure if it is the narrator is soldier at the center of the frame. Not that it matters; he is part of the group, the audience for the moral tale. The letter is not merely a rationalization for Mizushima's decision, but a message to a perhaps cynical and jaded audience afflicted by the postwar *zeitgeist*. Within the context of the film, Mizushima seems to be saying: 'Yes, we must rebuild our country, but we cannot forget our past. Sacrifices have been made and will continue to be made. But by holding onto our traditions, our duty to the dead and the living, we will have the strength to rebuild our shattered homeland.' You go forward, I will remain here to pray, to perform a kind of rearguard action to protect you. The ancestors must be placated so that good fortune will smile upon the Japanese race.'

The image dissolves to one that resembles the opening shot. A flat, barren expanse, the blood red soil, but now Mizushima walks away from the camera toward the horizon, presumably in search of the dead...

I have spent some time following the narrative of this film because there is so much to

learn here about Japanese attitudes toward the war. Though told as a remembrance, it is denuded of history, of time. Rather, the last days in Burma are a stage for a timeless encounter with humanity's suffering and the possibility of redemption. A nationalist and religious ideology is subtly invoked to reinterpret recent history – as were the religio-philosophical commentaries of Kenji Nishitani and Kitaro Nishida used to give succor to the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere and the supposed liberation from the West leading up to and during the war – instead of seeing it for what it was: a brutal and imperialist gambit. That the film structurally mimics this use of religious sanction to the events of the war, as seen in the way the flashback sequence is integrated into the simply secular desire to return home and rebuild Japan, is one of its great imaginative feats.<sup>155</sup> Yet this is very much in the tradition of Japan, at least since the Meiji Reformation. Religion has been yoked to nationalism. And so even in time of peace – an uncertain peace marked by the radical transformation of the war-making ideology – it is this deeper cosmology of (national) self that needs to be invoked to give value and authority to the present. Against the angst-laden times of postwar Japan, the humiliation of defeat and the Occupation, the economic struggle and the Emperor's renunciation of his divinity, the potential for social breakdown could only be combated by an already established, comforting ethic.

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<sup>155</sup> Just to be clear, I am suggesting that the flashback that fills in the story of Mizushima's transformation is a temporal intrusion into the chronology of the narrative that structurally replicates the thematics of the film. The personal spiritual journey is stitched back into the larger narrative tension of whether Mizushima will return to the warm embrace of his comrades or remain isolated from Japan itself. Narratively, the spiritual quest is resolved half way through the film. What remains is what I have been calling the drama of separation. Will he return or won't he? Will the group learn of the reasons for his decision? How will this affect the group? What lesson is being taught here (do not forget that the novel – and the film – is consciously didactic in its aspirations)? These questions are only resolved in the closing moments by explicitly underlying that Mizushima's spiritual purpose is to continue to serve Japan by ensuring that the Japanese war dead are properly buried, that their spirits are sufficiently placated and they will not eternally wander the rocky landscape of Burma; that through his ministrations they will be a source of comfort to their descendants and in time achieve their own rebirth.

Like all myths, it is a lie. In its rush to confront what were seen as the nihilistic forces at work in postwar Japan, *Harp of Burma* portrays the Japanese as the victim of war. Not its perpetrators. What it systematically denies is history. The events of the war have been transformed into a spatial plane of existential combat. Mizushima, to pave the way for the return (guilt free) of his companions, must sacrifice himself by remaining outside the Promised Land. What is missing from this space is an acknowledgment (at the very least) of the imperialistic, arrogant and sometimes brutal behavior of the Japanese in Burma.<sup>156</sup> The enticing humanist and Buddhist rhetoric masks its propagandistic intent. Mizushima may be burying history itself. The Burmese are portrayed as an innocent tribe living in a spiritual realm, indifferent to whichever conqueror passes through. As the monk tells Mizushima, “Whatever you do is useless. Whether the British come or the Japanese, Burma is Burma. Burma is Buddha’s country.” Thus the events of the Pacific War, its reasons, its consequences, can be quietly ignored. The quest for enlightenment, for tolerance and peace, must also include a degree of forgetfulness.

This may be precisely the stage upon which the New Japan has been enacted. Once again, it is a spiritual ethos that is the infrastructure of this ideology. It manifests as a politic that embraces nationalism and reestablishes harmony (the music may be a manifestation of this). It perpetuates the self-image of a peace-loving nation, with suffering and the requisite sacrifice to expiate that suffering, as being a necessary practice of citizenship. Last, but not least, it dismisses the facts of history. Thus while the image of Mizushima hovering over the fence separating his entrapped comrades lingers as a parable of the seemingly endless suffering of

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<sup>156</sup> The short but important sequence with the other company that refuses to surrender suggests what McDonald calls the “old type of soldier” (and there is a nice visual linkage via a hat with the sergeant, the most stern of Captain

humankind and the possibility of redemption, it also masks the double movement of self-serving nationalism in postwar Japanese society.

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As mentioned earlier, I am writing about the Americanized version of *Godzilla*. Given that this is an extended meditation on Japanese cinema, one would expect an analysis of the ‘pure’ version as opposed to the bastardized copy that continues to circulate outside of Japan. My defense is simply that it is an excuse to explore (or at least demonstrate) the fact that the domain of my subject matter is not some impermeable, pure object that remains unchanging, safely confined within its own borders, stewing in its own juices. As such, an analysis of national cinema is not about paring away any accumulated hubris or prying open an oyster shell casing to reveal the magical pearl within. There is no essence, no one-thing that needs to be discovered (or recovered). Rather there is a perpetual shifting relationship of the films to their environment – sliding past each other in a dialectical dance of resistance and affirmation. In fact, despite *Gojira* – that 1954, Toho produced, Inoshiro Honda directed, Sci Fi Monster epic – being muted and deformed by an American studio, it may be even more Japanese in its experience... for is this not related to the wider trope of radical change that characterized 1950s Japan? Does not *Godzilla* bear the imprint of this social reality? Indeed, the Americanized version contains something repressed in the original: the presence of America. Looking at the film (both versions) now, it is fascinating to discover that when Godzilla comes to terrorize Japan, the military response is solely Japanese. There’s not an American soldier in sight. Part of the reason for this exclusion may be that Godzilla is not really set within its ostensible time frame, but because it is a parable

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Ito’s company). The narrative quickly bypasses the hysteria and sense of loyalty exhibited by these soldiers.

of the nuclear bombs (and the American fire bombing of major cities such as Tokyo) dropped on Japan, its 'real' time may be when the Americans were not there (except as an avenging monster paying daily, fiery visits from the sky). Thus, the heroic battle against the monster is very much a Japanese response.

Briefly, the film opens with images of the destroyed city. The narrator tells us:

This is Tokyo, once a city of six million people. What has happened here was caused by a force that up until a few days ago was entirely beyond the scope of man's imagination. Tokyo, a smoldering memorial to the unknown, an unknown which at this point still prevails and could reach out at any time with its terrible destruction anywhere in the world.

This is the voice of Steve Martin, an American reporter, who has been caught in the devastation. He tries to stand up but collapses. The screen fades to black. He wakes up in a hospital and begins to tell the story of what has happened. Thus begins a flashback that will culminate in Godzilla demolishing Tokyo.

The story is quite simple. On his way to Cairo, Martin stops off in Tokyo to visit his old friend, Dr. Serizawa, a theoretical scientist. A police official at the airport questions him about whether he saw anything mysterious while flying over the Pacific Ocean. Sensing a story, Martin begins asking questions. Tomo Iwanaga, the security officer, tells Martin about a strange force – “a blinding flash of light and the ocean bursts into flame” – that has destroyed eight ships near Odo Island, one of many small islands off the mainland coast. Martin soon accompanies Dr. Yamani, a paleontologist, his daughter Emiko, her friend, Lieutenant Ogata and Iwanaga on a fact-finding trip to Odo. They find evidence of some deep-sea creature, along with signs of radiation. They witness an ancient “nature” ceremony that is used to appease a monster the

natives believe lies beneath the sea. Iwanaga informs Martin that in the past a young girl was sacrificed to the monster (a comment not in the original). That night the monster does indeed rise from the sea and destroy the village. Returning to Tokyo, Dr. Yamani announces his theory about the monster to the committee investigating the events. In answer to the question of why here, in Japan, now, he announces what is the apparent theme of the movie:

One answer could be that some rare phenomenon of nature allowed this being of the Jurassic Age to reproduce itself and for a long span of time had no reason to re-appear. But now analysis of radioactivity of the creature's footprints shows the existence of Strontium 90 – a product of the H-Bomb. I believe that Godzilla is resurrected due to the repeated experiments of the H-Bomb.

Emiko then visits Dr. Serizawa, her fiancée (though she is in love with Ogata), who shows her his latest invention. We are not shown what this is, for now, but Emiko is visibly moved by what she has seen and promises Dr. Serizawa to keep it a secret. The story proceeds to a series of attacks by Godzilla and the futile efforts of the Japanese army to defeat it. The flashback concludes with the spectacular destruction of Tokyo – for which the film is justifiably famous -- by the fire breathing, 400-foot tall Godzilla: a cross between a gorilla and a Tyrannosaurus Rex who seems impervious to all weapons and volts of electricity.

Upon the conclusion of the flashback, Emiko then tells Ogata and Steve Martin about Dr. Serizawa's invention (we are now shown what was elided in the earlier section). He has created an "Oxygen Destroyer" that may, in fact, save them all from the monster. Emiko and Ogata go to the doctor's lab to convince him to offer up his weapon in the fight against Godzilla. He resists, at first, arguing that his weapon would be too dangerous: "What will become of us if this weapon falls into the hands of the army?" But their discussion is interrupted by a television newscast:

“Attention. Attention. People of Japan. At this moment a nation wide prayer for the survivors of devastated Tokyo. The voices of our children are raised in a prayer for the courage to surmount the destruction of today and look forward with hope for peace and light.” As shots of the ruined city, the dead and wounded and girls (lined up neatly in a school gym) sing a mournful dirge, the tortured Dr. Serizawa overcomes his personal fears about the weapon – moved by the suffering Godzilla has caused Japan and the Japanese – and decides to use his weapon.

The final scene of the film features Ogata and Dr. Serizawa descending into the ocean to activate the Oxygen Destroyer as close to Godzilla as they can. Dr. Serizawa, however, cuts his lifeline, apparently to kill him self as well as the monster, so that he will not be tempted or forced to build another dangerous weapon. The weapon is a success and the raging monster is reduced to a lifeless skeleton. A voice over announces: “Godzilla is dead. Give us the strength to rebuild our beloved homeland.” Martin, however, gets the last line: “The menace was gone. But so was a great man. The whole world could wake up and live again.”

Even such a cursory examination of the plot suggests the subtle shifts in tone wrought by the addition of the ‘American’ scenes into the film. The nationalist rhetoric embedded in the unexpurgated Japanese version (a rhetoric that portrays the Japanese as the only victims of Godzilla and as the sole heroic opponents of the monster), is given a greater context by Martin, who interprets the actions of Godzilla as threatening the whole world.

Yet Steve Martin himself is a bit scary. Ironically, perhaps, the decision to add the American (a somewhat scary, somewhat Canadian Raymond Burr) accentuates the horror value of the film. He is always in a black suit contrasting with the lighter uniforms of the Japanese around him. He is a mildly disturbing figure who brings a brooding quality (especially in his

eyes) to the character. His calm amidst the chaos (and exaggerated expressions of the Japanese in the Japanese film) exalts his heroic status; though he does nothing particularly heroic, being primarily an observer of the action. Aside from his disturbing quality however, is the greater sense of realism his presence affords the film. For Martin signals an American presence at a structural level in both the filmic discourse and Japanese society. This 'realism' reveals itself in a number of ways. Given his status as a reporter (and a *gaijin*), Martin is able to interrupt and seek answers to what is occurring in the text. There is a wonderful level of abstraction that is engendered by this narrative device. He is there to witness the events, as is the audience, and thus the trappings of reportage allow a certain distance from the incidents that inadvertently reinforces their sense of reality. This abstracted, secondary relationship to the cinematic discourse distances us from the more melodramatic elements of the film. The romance, for example, is mostly downplayed – observed by Martin from the deck of a ship, the budding romance of Emiko and Ogata (though she is engaged to Dr. Serizawa) is characterized by him as the “eternal triangle,” his tone suggesting that it merely complicates the story. And, of course, he is right. Whereas Dr. Serizawa's suicide seems primarily to preserve the secret of his dangerous weapon, it is presented in the film as a solution to the eternal triangle (his death clears the way for Ogata and Emiko to get married). The romance does little to advance the plot, merely adding another degree of pathos to the story. In fact, the non-integration of the romance into the machinations of the plot also underscores another aspect of the film: Godzilla never menaces any one person. The monster never directly endangers the life of the hero or heroine (it is arguable as to who – other than the non-heroic Martin – is the heroic individual in the original film), thus there is no scenario where the hero must rescue the heroine (or any variation thereof) from the



clutches of the monster. The non-individuation of events is striking – especially since one would assume that the filmmakers were fully cognizant of the 1930s *King Kong* – and may be one further reason that the American distributors felt they needed to add the Martin character. And so we watch the film through Steve Martin's eyes. He is a mediating and interrogative figure and we watch with him, in horror (or bemusement) as the beast chews up the landscape, but also with a certain anthropological astonishment (to borrow Clifford's term) for Martin enters a space that he cannot fully comprehend, that is seemingly benign (postwar Japan or a Japanese film), but, as the monster is slowly revealed, becomes unimaginable and apocalyptic.

Martin carries with him a number of associations, both within and outside the film. His entry into the film – I would posit – is another version of the American Occupation in that it both mutes the original film and offers it outward to a non-Japanese audience. The use of Martin to suggest General MacArthur is easily established through the corn cob pipe that Martin wields throughout the film and many others have envisaged Godzilla as representative of the American bombing of Japan; thus by extension, there is the corollary association of Martin to Godzilla. However it is in the materiality of the film itself that this intrusion of the American Other into the 'homeland' space of Japan that is particularly fascinating.

In terms of language – along with the mismatched film stock – *Godzilla* (USA) soon loses interest in trying to permit the Japanese characters a voice in the film. Working under the assumption that subtitles would be the kiss of death at the box office, the film initially has a Japanese character – the police chief, Tomo Iwanaga – translate the dialogue for Martin (and for us). But as the action heats up, under the strain of scenes to which Martin would not be privy, it merely dubs over the characters' voices. This somewhat undermines the linguistic reasons for the

new scenes, and is also jarring since the audience has become used to the actors speaking Japanese. However, in addition to adding another level of self-reflexivity, the seemingly impromptu shift from Japanese to poorly dubbed English exposes much more. The distributor/producers were worried that no one – at least the intended lowbrow audience? – would want to watch a monster movie, not solely in Japanese, but solely with Japanese. What is left on screen of the original suggests they may have had a legitimate concern. The film's acting – or reacting to the monster – seems too overwrought (for our Western tastes), and the absence of an individual hero combating the monster further compounds the necessity for a large white male presence.

Steve Martin then is a necessary device to bridge a cultural gap as much as he is to redeem the clichéd and poorly acted drama beyond the appearances of Godzilla.<sup>157</sup> (In fact, the reporter in the original film can be glimpsed occasionally looking a little forlorn and confused). Without Martin, the film would be a species of simple-minded exotica, laughable and alien. He gives it the Hollywood Seal of Approval, dignifying the events with his stern voice (and look) while enhancing the pseudo-documentary style of the narrative. Yet this 'otherness' is precisely the effect of Martin's virtual presence – for he is not entirely present -- in the film. Insofar as the film sometimes seems like the horror story of a man who wakes up in a bad (or at least strange) Japanese monster movie, it is important to recognize the extent to which it is his very presence that renders the original as Other (alien, exotic, laughable); and, inevitably, for its critique of

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<sup>157</sup> This argument is complicated by the question of what is a bad sci-fi movie? 'Bad' is often good in the genre, contributing to the cult-like following a movie engenders. And in the context of this film, I am certainly not suggesting that the visually inferior, American-shot scenes (shot in one day, apparently) are any better than the original work.

America's relations with Japan to be repressed and/or contained. Embassy Pictures, the American studio responsible for the creation of this secondary discourse, cut about thirty minutes from the original before adding its new scenes. As well, the temporal ordering of the scenes (the opening shots of a destroyed Tokyo and then the extended flashback that relates the events leading up to the catastrophe) was a major contribution by the American producers that, from a purely practical standpoint, allowed the Martin character a position of editorial control over the flow of the narrative, able to elide or comment on actions within the movie.

Chon Noriega, writing in a collection of essays edited by Mick Broderick entitled *Hibakusha Cinema*, pursues the political and psychoanalytic repercussions of the monster across a number of *Godzilla* films in a manner similar to my argument.

The films transfer onto Godzilla the role of the United States in order to symbolically re-enact a problematic United States-Japan relationship that includes atomic war, occupation, and thermonuclear tests. The films, however, in their search for a solution do more than blame and destroy the transferred object, and thereby 'resolve' the 'problem.' 'Other-oriented and self-designation' mitigates the sharp division between self and Other implicit in the transference process so that Godzilla comes to symbolize Japan (self) as well as United States (Other). Like Godzilla, identified as a four-hundred tall dinosaur marking a transition between sea and land creatures and aroused 'after all these centuries' by Strontium-90 (a radioactive product of H-bomb explosions), Japan in 1954 is a transitional monster caught between the imperial past and the postwar industrial future, aroused by United States H-bomb tests. Thus the monster expresses more than impotent rage made powerful on fantasy, because the anxieties Godzilla reflects are as much about Japan as the United States. The film must balance these two anxieties, but cannot resolve them since they reside in one cure: they must be simultaneously repressed in order to rebuild the 'beloved homeland' (to make the transition) and yet be actively directed at United States H-bomb testing in order to address a pressing concern at a mass cultural level.

In the films, the new media function as psychoanalyst at the mass cultural level, mediating between society and the monster. The psychoanalyst plays two roles in the transference relationship: a symbolic one and an investigative one. The Japanese monster film divides these roles between the monster (symbolic) and the reporter (investigative). The reporter represents an institutionalized attempt to discover and expose social

anxieties (the monster) and their causes, while working 'behind the scenes' to discover and implement a solution.<sup>158</sup>

Noriega's analysis of *Godzilla* is fully sensitive to the multiple personalities of the monster, but his critique essentially focuses on how the Americanized version attempts to subvert any critique of its nuclear program and history in Japan. He concludes his section on the film by writing that the "Hollywood re-edited film plays on an American sense of guilt toward the Japanese in the early fifties, saying in effect, 'look at what we've done/are doing to Japan.' As with other American radioactive-monster films, this guilt is then projected onto the monster. *Godzilla*'s death represses American guilt and anxieties about nuclear weapons: both history and Japan's own filmic rendition are retextualized to erase the bomb and thereby relieve anxieties about the American occupation and H-bomb tests."<sup>159</sup>

Though, for the most part, I agree with his argument, I am particularly interested in how *Godzilla* speaks to/about Japanese attitudes in the postwar period. In this regard, the film represents the collusion of the Japanese with American nuclear policy, despite early mass protest against it. As well, it exemplifies much of the Americanization of Japan, both culturally and politically in this era. In fact, it looks forward to the contemporary popular culture films of the 1990s. *Godzilla* is representative of acts of containment on both sides; psychological and otherwise. If we can view the film as spatially accommodating the American presence in its very materiality, we can begin to understand the larger political and historical processes at work in Japan at this time. America is a monster that must be tamed, indeed, embraced. And the film is an enactment of this very process; one that would ultimately be the central element in Japan's

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<sup>158</sup> Chon Noriega, "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When *Them!* Is U.S.," in *Hibakusha Cinema*, ed. Mick Broderick (New York: KPI, 1996), p.61.

postwar recovery. Better the monster you know than the vagaries of whatever lurks beneath the ever-troublesome sea.

Thus, despite the interruptive and destabilizing nature of the original narrative signalled by the presence of Martin, it ironically brings the film's already displaced space into a closer contemporary alignment by installing an American presence into Japan that the original had elided. *Godzilla (USA)* is not completely successful in its attempt to mask/mute the Japaneseness of the film, perhaps because the sheer ferocity of the monster is such that this shrink-wrapped transparency simply cannot repress the real existential anguish wrought by the 'arrival' of the atomic bomb upon Japanese soil.

Without a certifiable hero battling the beast, we are left with the true star of the film: Godzilla. Of stentorian rage, vengeful wrath and impermeable skin, the irradiated monster spews a hot breath that ignites its surroundings, destroying everything in its path. Godzilla is a floating metaphor, arising from its long ocean sleep. The monster is not humanized (until later sequels), but imbued with myriad symbolic connotations, a shifting symbolic license to accrue both historic and contemporary interpretations. Most explicitly, Godzilla represents the A-bomb, wrecking havoc on the urban environs and its inhabitants. It is America rendered as a T-Rex monkey in a rubber suit, an alien (gaijin) barbarian, if there ever was one. Yet more subtly, Godzilla additionally functions as an embodiment of the evil of rampant technological growth. He is the result of reckless scientific endeavor adrift of moral consequences. In his casual gait one can glimpse the beast of the apocalypse.... slouching toward Tokyo to be born. If this opinion seems overdone, it is perhaps necessary to reflect back to the fifty plus years since the

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63.

first blinding white light ripped apart the fabric of existence for the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and both Soviet and U.S. hydrogen bomb testing in the Pacific, which in the case of U.S. tests in the Bikini atoll resulted in the radiation poisoning of the crew of the Japanese fishing boat Lucky Dragon and subsequent huge protests within Japan against further testing and development of nuclear bombs). The world, and in particular the Japanese, were forced into coming to terms with the awesome weapon that had been created (and used). The story of Godzilla (and its multiple incarnations) is the history of the bomb from a human perspective. In the spectacles of mass destruction we revisit the scene of the crime, the moment when the human race could envision its own self-destruction beyond mere metaphysical speculation and prophetic tales.

In an essay entitled "Tokyo must be Destroyed," Ken Hollings argues that

ever since he first burst onto the big screen back in 1954, Godzilla has become famous for the lasting impression he has made on the Tokyo skyline. Returning to the great metropolis over and over again in well over half of the twenty-one feature films in which he has appeared so far, Godzilla, the undisputed king of *kaiju eiga*, has left it in ruins every time... However, as a true run-away child of the nuclear age, Godzilla is also subject to the Uncertainty Principle. Just as it is impossible to determine a subatomic particle's exact position, direction and velocity all at the same time, the Big G does not allow himself to be pinned down that easily. Does he represent some kind of dark, unacknowledged obsession which the Japanese have with their own destruction, or is he just a guy in a rubber monster costume jumping up and down on a tabletop landscape pretending to shoot radioactive flame from his mouth?<sup>160</sup>

Acknowledging *Godzilla's* twin ancestry, *King Kong* and *The Beast from 2000 Fathoms*, and Eastern and Western concepts of cinematic realism, Hollings further notes that the monster "was presented to the Japanese public as Gojira; a hybrid name which co-joins the Western word "gorilla" with the Japanese "kujira", meaning a whale. He was also quite evidently a man in a

rubber suit; an aspect of the *kaiju eiga* genre which has never gone down particularly well with Western audiences who tend to confuse notions of spectacle with those of realism.”<sup>161</sup>

For Hollings, *Godzilla* is representative of an aesthetic that permits a measure of transparency over a desire for realist illusion; yet also opens the door for a more ideological understanding of the monster: “Godzilla's Eastern origins ensured his divergence from Western notions of reality almost from his very inception. His twin shadows emanate from a common point; that troubled moment after the Second World War where East met West on the most uneasy of terms, the American Occupation of Japan.”<sup>162</sup>

The seminal event of this encounter of East and West remains the dropping of the bomb, an unimaginable event that ironically, can only be imagined. Hollings comments about Hiroshima and by extension Tokyo and what Susan Sontag had famously called the ‘Imagination of Disaster,’ are worth quoting in this context:

Perhaps because Hiroshima is simultaneously a place and an event, it must always be approached obliquely. As the effects of radiation sickness become increasingly apparent, from one generation to the next, the connection between the two becomes more and more apparent: Hiroshima is a monument that exists in both time and space. What makes this fact all the more terrible is that Ground Zero must always remain an imaginary terrain. There is not a soul alive today who can tell us what happened at the centre of the bombed area. “The great mysterious monster conquered the city in an instant,” Kenzaburo Oe observed in his *Hiroshima Notes* - and that instant is really nothing more than a single frame of film passing through a movie projector's gate.<sup>163</sup>

Is this then at the root of *Godzilla*'s enduring popularity? That the monster is not only a

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<sup>160</sup> Ken Hollings, “Tokyo Must be Destroyed,” *Communications Theory* (an on-line journal). [www.ctheory.net/text.Article:A027](http://www.ctheory.net/text.Article:A027),

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* CT

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 1966), p. 162.

representation of the moment of creation of the new Japan but also, in its fiery breath, the apocalyptic moment, or as Hollings says “a single frame” that captures the potential and unimaginable moment of our destruction of the planet. And if it -- this humble plastic toy of a movie -- is, is not our post-Hiroshima modernity always subject to a perpetual angst that cannot be assuaged, but must be returned to in endless sequels; a temporal circling of the exploded space?

Godzilla's greatest strength, therefore, lies not in its fiery breath but in its symbolic freedom. As part of a specific *nihonjinron* discourse, Godzilla evokes the vicissitudes of living in the aftermath of the bomb, but also, significantly, the defeat and Occupation. As in most monster flicks, the psychological dimension is never anything but complex. Godzilla is America and the Bomb, but also predates them. The Odo island sequence is important in this regard because it establishes the monster as particularized to Japan itself. Within the parameters of this postwar navel-gazing, the (American) nuclear testing awakens a Japanese beast that threatens to infect and/or destroy the world (in the American version) and Japan (in the Japanese original). Strictly speaking, within the narrative, technology is the instigator of this violence, not its agent. Indeed, the Japanese conventional weapons are ineffective against the monster. But more salient is that Godzilla may represent a Japan awakened by technology (and by extension, modernity). Thus Dr. Serizawa's anguish at the responsibility he carries because he has created a weapon that may fall into militaristic hands. Because of these particular narrative details (away from a parable strictly focused on the A-Bomb), there is the distinct suggestion that Godzilla's actions represent a violence wrought upon Japan due to past sins. The traditional ceremonies meant to placate the beast have not been performed, or have not been done adequately (though it is necessary to point



out Iwanaga's comment in the American-shot scenes that virgins were once sacrificed to the beast to placate its rage, is not in the original). Godzilla's destructiveness is thus a response to a Japan that has abandoned its traditional values. Or, alternatively, the monster is an embodiment of the recent militarism of Japanese society; a representation of the Japan that had been awakened by its radical and traumatic birth into (Western) modernity.

Given the postwar existential climate, the monster from the past comes back to haunt a Japan that has forgotten its own sense of self. In a scene preceding Godzilla's first attack on Tokyo, the authorities think they have eliminated the monster and people go about their nighttime activities, in this case a party aboard a ship in Tokyo harbor. Listening and dancing to contemporary (western) pop music, the urban, westernized revelers are shocked out of their complacency by the appearance of Godzilla. The initial swath that Godzilla cuts through Tokyo and the penultimate battle reveal in the destruction of the city, its high rises and factories, trains, power lines, military weaponry, etc. Indeed, Godzilla could even be read as representative of the great Kanto earthquake of 1923 that demolished much of the city. Such interpretations, not as explicit in the film as the link to the atomic bomb, are buttressed by a generalized sense of uncertainty about Japan's whole modernization enterprise; one that stretches back to the Meiji Reformation in the 1860s. The other side of this yearning for what was lost is the fear of what the consequences of radical change would be. Godzilla then can be conceived as an avenging angel punishing the new Japan.

A similar interpretation of the complex metaphoric presence of the beast is that it is a depiction of what has been so assiduously suppressed by the New Japan: war time guilt. In this scenario, Godzilla is a military aggressor. But in a grand, easy enough act of transference, surely

the stuff of dreams and movies, Japan and the Japanese are the only victims. The fight against the monster (and its temporary death) then is an enactment of the repudiation of the fascism of the previous two decades, the 'old soldiers' of the 1930s and 40s. The monster haunts the postwar imagination as the memory of militarism and wartime suffering; indeed the commingling of these recent experiences is condensed into a simpler expression of overall victimization.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Mary-Lea Cox and Alexei, writing on the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars website, report on a presentation by Michael Schaller entitled "The Monster's Trail: Godzilla in U.S.-Japan Relations" (October 28, 1998) and the response by Ian Buruma (author of a number of books and articles on Japan, including *The Wages of Guilt*, an examination of Japanese and German attitudes to questions about their war crimes).

Schaller explained that the very first Godzilla film, produced by a Japanese studio in 1954, reflected strong anti-nuclear sentiment following the U.S. hydrogen bomb test at the Bikini atoll. In that original movie, Godzilla mysteriously emerges from the sea following the Bikini test. He then proceeds to attack Japan and destroys Tokyo. The 1956 American release, however, cut most of the anti-nuclear references.

In Japanese sequels, Godzilla continued to represent other threats to Japan, Schaller added. For instance, in the 1962 film, *King Kong vs. Godzilla*, the American King Kong helps the Japanese Self Defense Forces scare away a Godzilla that emerged from the sea off Siberia. In another sequel, Godzilla protects Japan by fighting off a smog monster. The latest Godzilla film is largely emptied of political content, Schaller said.

Commenting on Schaller's presentation, Ian Buruma said that the Godzilla movies revealed "a kind of relish on the part of Japanese audiences to see themselves as victims of disaster." Drawing on his extensive study of Japanese cinema, Buruma observed that many other Japanese movies portray the Japanese as vulnerable victims to both natural and man-made catastrophes. He noted that racial discrimination at the hands of the Western powers, and a powerful outside world victimizing Japan, are common themes in Japanese popular culture.

Buruma suggested that Japan's experience of devastating earthquakes might be one explanation for this sense of "victimhood." And he agreed with Schaller that there were also political and historical reasons for Japan to feel this way. Both Left and the Right felt victimized in the wake of the American Occupation of Japan and throughout the Cold War, Buruma explained. The Left resented the U.S. military presence and constraints it placed on labor organization, while the Right resented the Occupation-era constitution that took away Japan's right to maintain a military. According to Buruma, even today, this sense of "victimhood" continues to complicate Japanese attitudes toward their country's role in World War II. ([Http://wwics.si.edu/WHATSNEW/NEWnews/buruma.htm](http://wwics.si.edu/WHATSNEW/NEWnews/buruma.htm))

Whereas the Schaller's argument, also echoed by Chon Noriega and Beverley Bare Buehrer, highlights the differences between the original and Americanized version of the film to show how the references to the continued

The above comments are textually based psychological speculations that are intriguing (I hope), but should not be seen as exhausting the interpretative possibilities of the film. The wit and irony expressed in the movie – and in the not always self-reflexive campiness of the genre – undermines any solely textual analysis. Recognizing the ironic appeal of the film, Japanese producers would churn out variations and sequels of the original where the manga-like expressiveness of the Japanese characters caught in the crossfire of proliferating monsters would be part of the joke – one at their (Japanese) expense, but so lucrative as to warrant repetition. The endless variations eventually resulted in a kind of domestication of the beast. The Japanese began to enjoy their victimization by the monster. And the monster, in turn, was tamed, embraced, as much as American culture was.

The taming of the beast – with echoes of Stanley Kubrick’s ironically titled *Doctor Strangelove or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* – through endless iterations, meant that the bomb (Godzilla’s most significant signifier) could be trivialized. Whereas the first *Godzilla* film (or films since it has been doubled) still bears the serious mark of the Pacific War and the Atom Bomb, latter incarnations would become childlike, cartoonish

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testing of new and improved nuclear bombs have been muted, I am much more concerned to examine the film(s) as embedded within a larger discourse of national self-portraiture. In both versions, nationalist sentiments have been subtly utilized to critique the atomic bomb. However, the monster is a much more freely floating signifier in my conception of *Godzilla*; prefiguring the monster’s incarnations in later films.

Buruma’s comments are closer to the mark, particularly because they evoke another aspect of the critique of American nuclear policy. Rather than directly arguing against the madness of dangerous nuclear proliferation, the substitution of *Godzilla* for the Bomb – especially by its only known victims – permits this criticism to stand amidst a plethora of other, more self-serving ideological associations. The sense of “victimhood” that Buruma sees as characteristic of Japanese attitudes toward World War II does indeed complicate their own (sometimes miserly) attempts to discuss their own role in the fifteen year period of colonial misadventure.

copies denuded of the powerful and self-conscious force of the original.<sup>165</sup> In effect, *Godzilla* mutates from Bomb(ing)/American Occupation/technology/Japanese militarism/the dilemma of modernity and so forth onto a humble spin-off meant to prop up sales of the plastic toys. An adaptation -- like *Godzilla* is an adaptation to some extent of *King Kong*(1931) and *Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) -- that could be mass-produced and exported to an international audience seeking cheap diversions. Japanese producers (if not their audiences) would love *Godzilla* the way they love any profitable product. Similarly, the films reflect how the Japanese would embrace their defeat and turn it into a trivial item, such as transistor radio or any other Made in Japan toy; something synonymous with cheap, plastic, exploitative, for sale. Ultimately to be discarded. It is not unimaginable that the commercialization of *Godzilla* prefigures the successful transition to a carnivorous capitalism that would eventually assuage this sense of defeat and victimization

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Aside from the social meanings implicit in subsequent incarnations of *Godzilla*/*Godzilla* -- and they limn an interesting parallel of generic evolution similar to change in National Cinema as a structuring device to look at the movies -- the original Japanese-American version(s) embodies a nexus of psychological and ideological attitudes of the first decade of the postwar period. New Japan, created out of the ashes of WW II, defeat, occupation, the (universal though also particularly Japanese) horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and subsequent social change could be embodied even in the most apparently trifling of cinematic offerings. *Godzilla*,

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<sup>165</sup> Actually, this thought should be tempered by acknowledging Chon Noriega's and Donald Glut's work on the succeeding monster films. *Godzilla* became a genre onto itself, and despite the increasingly 'kids cinema' quality of the sequels with their proliferating monsters, they demonstrate that it is this childishness itself that is interesting.

predominantly because of its popularity, may, in retrospect, be the most significant film worth examination from this period. The discrete displacement of these postwar issues onto the monster narrative affords multiple interpretations; though the principal one may still remain a deep seated fear of the Bomb and sense of victimization.<sup>166</sup> The sheer spectacle of Godzilla's attack on Tokyo is rendered with such cinematic force that it lingers well after whatever thematic associations can be teased from the text. The narrative structure maintains – with its irrelevant romance, lack of individual hero and depersonalization of Godzilla's aggression -- an emphasis on the destruction and the idea of rebuilding of Japan after this apocalyptic devastation. The film opens with poignant shots of the exploded city, temporally retreats via Steve Martin's (flashback) account of what has happened, climaxes with Tokyo reduced to rubble, then proceeds in its closing movement to the killing of the monster and the promise to rebuild "our beloved homeland" (Japanese comment) and the world "made safe" (American addition).

That *Harp of Burma* concludes with a similar coda (at sea, the characters promise themselves to the rebuilding of Japan) is the initial affiliation that can be drawn between these two apparently dissimilar works.<sup>167</sup> Their displaced wartime narratives permit them to express a strong nationalist message without espousing a strident right-wing agenda. However, in the process, the depiction of Japan as victim distorts any realistic understanding of the War. The ideological consequence of such a displacement and distortion serve to bolster a sense of national self that is heroic and selfless. Indeed, first impressions (ironically, especially in the Americanized version) of *Godzilla* are that the Japanese have defended the world against a cruel

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and calamitous force. And in *Harp of Burma*, the critical reception still maintains that it is principally an anti-war film, a humanist masterpiece extolling the virtues of forgiveness and universal redemption. Indeed, both films are remarkable in that they contribute to a positive Japanese self-image and celebration of its values without any overt nationalist rhetoric or anti-American sentiment.

The spatio-temporal construction of both films involves a significant flashback that destabilizes the strict chronological flow of their narratives. In the case of *Harp of Burma*, it weaves the spiritual odyssey of Mizushima into the wider didactic concerns of the story. As it is, the space of the narrative has been historically defused, thus this temporal stratagem only deepens our sense of the spiritual in the film. The resulting message of *Harp of Burma* is one of heroic sacrifice, spiritual enlightenment and the championing of traditional values that continue to guide the activities of the New Japan. As I have earlier argued, the construction of social space in Japanese society is not from a purely materialist perspective, but one rooted in its own cosmologies. The denial of the facts of history is crucial in maintaining the coherency and power of this spatial fabula against the temporal onslaught, the radical reversals of Japanese society in the twentieth century. The wartime defeat is turned into an existential landscape where victory comes from the assertion of Japanese spiritual values.

*Godzilla*, contrarily, suffers the Occupation even within the materiality of the film itself. The American 'invasion' of the film alters the temporal flow (through the flashback and cheap back lot scenes) to universalize the threat of the monster and displace American guilt about its relations with Japan. But it is the spatial intrusion that the original remarkably survives by

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<sup>167</sup> One inessential fact of note is that both films do share the same music director.

already having displaced its intent. The battle against the monster is a (mostly) masked version of the War that, ironically, the Americanized version brings forward into the postwar period. It somewhat mutes the critique of the Bomb (or America's role in its development and deployment), but continues to authenticate the heroism of the Japanese in defending themselves against the (American-produced) monster by universalizing the importance of their struggle. The incipient nationalism of the original film is thus partially hidden by this overlay. By restricting the symbolic significance of Godzilla to primarily that of the A-Bomb (and not Japan or America), the Americanized version may have – if I am not being too perverse – done for the film what the spiritual niceties of *Harp of Burma* did for it: further the ideologically loaded depiction of the Japanese as victims while still promoting the idea that Japan is expiating its sins through its battle and eventual defeat of the monster; thus making the world safe once more (or at least until the sequels).

The spatial domain of these two films – where innocent Japanese soldiers make ethical and spiritual choices and Japanese soldiers and civilians heroically battle an alien destructive force – reveals just how important a displaced representation of the War was to early postwar cinema in Japan. Rather than an honest examination of the causes, events and consequences of the Pacific War, cinematic representations tended to focus on Japanese feelings of victimization and their brave sacrifices, often ending with a heroic determination to rebuild their shattered home; that they do so without any overt accusatory fingers pointed at what may have caused this catastrophe serves to further emphasize their humanitarian self-image. These discursive strategies draw a veil over the actualities of history, spatially separating the New Japan from the old, or reinterpreting the past as an existential (*Godzilla*) or spiritual (*Harp of Burma*) conflict

that essentially supports the ideological and metaphysical foundations of postwar Japan. At a more abstract level, the temporal structures of the films mimic and reinforce the contemporary (the time in which the films were made and disseminated) social space, and provide sustenance to the 'new' spatial configuration; though how 'new' may be a continuing point of contention.



## CHAPTER SEVEN:

### **Ikiru: The Short Happy Life of Mr. Watanabe**

Unlike his more famous samurai films that play their own ideological role in the postwar reconstruction, Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* -- perhaps his best film -- is a contemporary drama that directly explores the anxieties faced by many in postwar Japan. It is a stylistic tour de force, a realist and expressionist text, a politically-charged existential exploration of what it means 'to live' in a modern society, circa 1950s Japan. This film is the Western-influenced, ideologically conservative Kurosawa in full warrior mode. Here he engages with Japanese society in a mood of bitterness and sympathy. The film's stylistic virtuosity, paradigmatic of the crisscrossed tensions and movements of the early postwar years, directly addresses the emptiness of individual lives and seemingly endemic corruption of Japanese society. The concluding movement -- dominated by the hero's wake -- is crucial in this regard because it lifts the story of one man into a generalized question about the moral values of the society.

Kurosawa's career has been analyzed by many critics, both within and outside of Japan, partially because of the apparent 'Westernness' of his style and popularity overseas. He is often described as a transitional figure between east and west, having adapted a number of Western plays and novels as well as being a major influence on the self-reflexive Westerns directed by Sergio Leone and later the films of George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola and others (indeed, it is under the auspices of Coppola's Zoetrope Studios that Kurosawa was able to keep making films in the twilight of his career). *Rashomon*, followed by *Ikiru*, launched Japanese cinema on the world stage and announced the presence of a filmmaker able to cross cultural boundaries. *The*

*Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* remain standards against which other *chambara* (historical sword fighting films) are judged even as they reinvigorated the Western genre in the 1960s.

As such, Kurosawa is a seminal figure in the concept of "Intertextual Cinema." Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco and Mikael Bakhtin, James Goodwin -- with Kurosawa in mind -- defines a text as "inherently a plurality or *intertext*, that operates within any given text. The intertext is a discursive space for the dissemination, rearticulation, interrogation, and recontextualization of cultural materials. Intertextuality is not simply a procedure of interpreting one text by way of another but a principle that each text is already the meeting place for materials from many text."<sup>168</sup> Adherence to such a notion privileges the destruction of barriers not only between individual texts and assorted artistic mediums, but also whatever cultural borders there may be between nations. For the many critics who have written on Kurosawa, the question of where he is situated is never far from the surface.

In *The Warrior's Camera*, Stephen Prince, while acknowledging the cultural and political influences of postwar Japanese society, emphasizes that Kurosawa's political engagement can be directly attributed to the influence of Bertolt Brecht, Sergei Eisenstein and Zen Buddhism. Even Noël Burch who celebrates the cultural independence of Japanese cinema (especially in the 1930s) from Western systems of decoupage by giving preference to the influence of traditional, and in particular Heian art forms, and critiques later filmmakers for falling away from this tradition, sees in Kurosawa's work a self-conscious and deconstructive use of Western codes that allow him to remain true to his Japanese roots. On the other hand, Donald Richie, the doyen of

Japanese film criticism in the West, sees Kurosawa's cinema as emphasizing the continuance of samurai traditions in contemporary Japan, where decisive action, an awareness of life's fragility and imperfection and a desire for a clear eyed engagement with reality coalesced into a coherent and consistent vision. For Richie, these are thematic attributes that are influenced by the West, but still particularly Japanese, and can be found in all of Kurosawa's films, regardless of time period or genre.

These images of Kurosawa as a latter day samurai warrior are contested by Tadao Sato who accentuates the personal quest and political despair exhibited by Kurosawa's work: "With defeat in World War II, many Japanese, who had made the objectives of the nation their objective in life, were dumbfounded to find that the government had lied to them and was neither just or dependable. During this uncertain time Akira Kurosawa in a series of first-rate films, sustained the people by his consistent assertion that the meaning of life is not dictated by the nation but something each individual should discover for himself through suffering. *Ikiru* is the clearest expression of not only this assertion but also of the essence of Kurosawa because he used his whole range of cinematic techniques to imbue it with all the themes he felt deeply about."<sup>169</sup> Sato still sees Kurosawa's protagonists as heroic, but a crucial aspect of this heroism is its individual nature. Sato never really addresses if this can be considered a particularly Western notion, but it is associated with the rebirth of Japan in the postwar era. However, he notes, the individual acting alone (surely one of the defining principles of the word) may be bound to failure. This ambivalence about individuality is at the core of Sato's understanding of

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<sup>168</sup> James Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 10.

Kurosawa's work:

If an individual tries to tackle social evils alone, he inevitably invites self-annihilation, but at the same time this has a certain beauty. This motif, appearing frequently in Kurosawa's films, is another way of saying that those who try to assert themselves forcefully should not fear their own destruction. A lack of fear of death and an acute awareness of annihilation can make one act even more effectively for justice. This is the most important requisite for a Kurosawa film hero, and it is best fulfilled by the main characters in *Ikiru* and *The Quiet Duel*, men who sought to live justly while combating grave illnesses. The sick people who appear in his other works are variations of these characters.

In Kurosawa's imagination the strength of an individual takes on the analogy of one who is fighting against grave illness. This may be eccentric and sentimental, but it reflects a necessary process through which the Japanese can recover from the shock of defeat and become independent individuals<sup>170</sup>

These sometimes conflicting views of Kurosawa's films underline the difficulty of placing the director. Richie sees Kurosawa's moral vision as intimately linked to the warrior code – *bushido* – that was dominant in pre-Meiji Japan, but that still persists in the sacrificial bravery of the filmmaker's heroes. As such, Kurosawa remains elementally Japanese. Sato, crucially, is more concerned to show that the characters' courage is to be found in their opposition to a corrupt state and in the embrace of an individuality that is in contrast to the meek conformity of the majority of Japanese people. The heroic act is best valued, however, when it is in the service of changing the very society it opposes; and is only successful when performed in unison with others. Both critics ground Kurosawa's work in the concerns of postwar Japan, without fully addressing the apparently westernized aspects of Kurosawa's 'message' and style. Burch's more nuanced view, contrarily, is keen to characterize Kurosawa's self-conscious style as related to Japanese artistic traditions and thus non-Western. Conversely, Prince argues that

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<sup>169</sup> Tadao Sato, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, trans. By Gregory Barrett (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1982), p. 116.

“from his first film, Kurosawa had employed a particular mode of address for his Japanese audiences that preserved suspended in dialectical tension a mix of Eastern and Western values. As his career progressed, the particular mix of values would shift and alter, but always for Kurosawa the overriding importance was to use film to make history, to address the Japan shattered by World War II, and help to reshape its society.”<sup>171</sup> For Prince, this East/West dialectic that is synthesized in a cinema didactically directed at repairing postwar Japan would find its most important correlative in Brechtian theatre. Thus Kurosawa is ‘within’ the ideological pre-occupations of *nihonjinron*, but outside of specific Japanese cultural traditions.

Goodwin, remaining true to his intertextual principles, goes beyond these auteurist positions and positioning of Kurosawa to argue that “the author-function is a locus for circulation and exchange among cultural materials of a given social environment and historical era... Conceptions of an auteur, which posit individualism and cultural autonomy and which assume a stable and singular origin for the film, cannot adequately serve the purposes of intertextual analysis.”<sup>172</sup> In the same way, he notes “a text does not derive exclusively from an author’s individuality; it is replete with usages from elsewhere. It is a texture, a tissue for the articulation and distribution of various social discourses, cultural codes, and image systems.”<sup>173</sup> Ironically then, rather than celebrate the individual power and autonomy of Kurosawa or his heroes or even the films, it is important to see how they are constructed by, or at the very least an expression of their spatial and temporal surroundings.

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* P. 123.

<sup>171</sup> Stephen Prince, *The Warrior’s Camera The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>172</sup> *Goodwin*, p. 22-23.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Such an approach is particularly relevant to *Ikiru* for the hero, Mr. Watanabe, is as much 'a locus for circulation and exchange among cultural materials of a given social environment and historical era' as Kurosawa. In the film, this humble Japanese 'salaryman' becomes an Everyman, representative of the stresses and strains of modernity, a conduit through which we can approach the emptiness and meaninglessness of existence itself. At its simplest level, the film is the story of a man who learns he is dying from cancer. After a few weeks of intense and dispiriting contemplation, he decides to devote his remaining time to building a playground that will not only benefit the community but somewhat atone for his aimless and unfulfilled existence. In the hands of a lesser director, this story could easily descend into sentimentality and bathos. But the visual dynamism and self-conscious dramaturgy of the film, its spatial contrasts and temporal fragmentation raises this simple story into a grander realm: it becomes an interrogation of postwar Japan without parallel. To investigate the structural elements of the film is to directly confront, with Kurosawa, the overwhelming spatial embrace that threatens to smother post-war Japanese society. More than any other film discussed here, *Ikiru* is a *writerly* work that demands a similar deconstructive passion that Kurosawa brings to bear on his social environment. Indeed, what is striking about the film is that the life of Mr. Watanabe is deconstructed, presented and represented from various, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints. He is a shifting interstice, constantly charted and re-positioned. There is no one Mr. Watanabe except as a location for competing interpretations. He is symbolic (as an Everyman), but also a cipher through which the society can see itself. From an intertextual perspective, if it is counterproductive to celebrate Kurosawa as the *auteur* then Mr. Watanabe is better viewed as not being 'authored'; at least in the traditional sense. Such a consideration is important because

what is at stake in the matter of Mr. Watanabe are notions of self and individuality – notions particularly relevant in postwar *nihonjinron* thought. Not only is Watanabe's search for meaning or meaningfulness in life a narrative imbedded within the film, it is the search for an authentic self against what has been the suffocating embrace of a corrupt and callous society. That the film distances itself, somewhat, from his journey is crucial for it reveals the arduousness of such a task. Selfhood cannot be as easily assumed in Japanese as it may be in Western society. It may, for example, not be as easily equated with Individuality, as a search for personal meaning and activity. Rather, there is most often a feeling that the self is a construction within the context of the social world and that meaningful action revolves around the question of how best to serve the family or company or even the nation at large. These are the questions, I believe, that lie at the heart of *Ikiru*. The film replicates this search by desperately seeking Mr. Watanabe even as he desperately seeks answers to his own wasted life; thus the fissured, self-reflexive nature of the narrative.

Before outlining the structure of the film's episodic plot and differing cinematographic strategies, it is worth acknowledging one reoccurring aspect of the visual presentation: Kurosawa's pointed positioning of Mr. Watanabe in the *mise en scène*. No matter what particular stylistic element dominates an episode, it would seem that the director is careful to draw attention to the social landscape. Mr. Watanabe is often used to divide the screen, sometimes looming over it or as a framing device to direct our gaze to the background. It is important to never divorce the hero from his surroundings because this is not merely his story, but an analysis, an x-ray of a wide spectrum of postwar society. Such a visual framework is especially notable because the last third of the film in many ways reverses this process by having a photograph of

the deceased Mr. Watanabe serve as the background for the actions of those attending his wake.

Visual concerns aside, it is the temporal play of the film that is at first most striking. The plot is so fragmented that it is helpful to name and describe the parts.

### **Living Dead:**

The film's introductory section opens with an x-ray of Mr. Watanabe's stomach. A narrator – who remains unidentified and eventually disappears from the film – informs us in a slightly mocking tone that it is Watanabe's, the Chief of the Citizen's Section of City Hall. A quick dissolve shows us Watanabe sitting at his desk hemmed in by paperwork. A cut reveals a group of women at the complaints desk in Watanabe's section requesting that the city drain some swampy land near their homes that is making their children sick, but Watanabe curtly tells his assistant to send them off to another department. The camera stays with Watanabe as the narrator explains that this is the film's main character, "but he's boring now. He's just passing the time, he just drifts through life. In fact, he's barely alive." The narrator continues to mock Watanabe, partly blaming the drudgery of bureaucratic life for the fact that he has been "dead for 25 years." A series of wipes shows the women being given the roundabout by various city departments (and also serving as a shorthand way of introducing officials who will return toward the end of the film) until they are brought back full circle to Watanabe's section. When they complain of their mistreatment, the Citizen's Section relents a little explaining that their boss, Mr. Watanabe, is not available (this is also the first moment the audience is aware of a temporal ellipsis in the film; there will be others).

These early moments introduce many of the principal characters, but also set a visual pattern. The shot from behind Watanabe, with his staff divided on each side of him evokes early



on an arrangement that will be reversed in the film's penultimate scene, Watanabe's wake. It establishes the importance of Watanabe in the visual frame, not merely as the central character but as part of a self-conscious staging of the *mise en scène* that emphasizes foreground/background relations. As well, the series of wipes used to montage the women's trip through city hall's bureaucratic hell will reoccur throughout the film, mostly to aid its pacing (to move the story along at a fine clip); though, Prince insists, this also represents the use of a common Hollywood editing practice (particularly common in 1940s newspaper and detective dramas) as a Brechtian distancing device.

What further distinguishes this part is the presence of the narrator. His mockery of Watanabe and city hall bureaucracy immediately distances us from the characters and events of the film. More importantly, his comments reveal his omniscient status; his knowledge about what will be unveiled. Yet Kurosawa, after inscribing himself (or at least an authorial position) in the text in this way, seems to retreat. The narrator will only make a brief comment later to inform us of Watanabe's death; thus this introduction is marked off in the film, separated in tone as the other parts themselves will be. It is one take (and there will be many others) on the meaning of Watanabe's life and death; slightly bitter, cynical but with the promise of some greater insight that will be gleamed from this seemingly hopeless, cowed salaryman.

### **Night of the Living Dead**

Whereas the previous section established a derisive distance from the main character and the world within which he barely moves, a world in fact characterized as immobile, deadening, this part is more subjective and sympathetic. Watanabe goes to the hospital where the doctors, having examined his x-rays, realize that he has an inoperable gastric cancer; but refuse to tell

him. Warned beforehand by another patient, however, Watanabe realizes that he has only a few months to live. These scenes, which seem strange at first because of the looming close-ups of Watanabe and his fellow patient as they wait and the shadows in the examining room, presage what will later become apparent. It is the beginning of a more psychologized, expressionistic turn in the narrative. As Watanabe steps outside the clinic in total silence, his somnambulant walk is interrupted by the honking of a truck that nearly runs him over. This jarring sound up awakens us to the fact that we have already entered an internal space, Watanabe's long night of suffering, of remorse and sense of shame at his wasted and unhappy life. The whole hospital episode and the scenes that follow are focused on Watanabe's response to the news of his illness. The darkness at the edges of the frame emphasize the psychological interiority of these scenes.

Returning home, a shattered, despairing, almost ghost-like Mr. Watanabe sits in the dark to await his family. His son, Mitsuo, and daughter in law, Kazue, enter the house and not seeing him in the dark, discuss Watanabe's miserliness and their impatience with him; to the strains of the jazz ballad, "Too Young." They are embarrassed when they realize he is sitting in the room and Mitsuo reacts angrily, feeling that the old man has purposely put him in an awkward situation. This miscommunication and misunderstanding (not seeing) between father and son will continue throughout the film, emblematic of their alienation from each other. Through the course of the evening and next few weeks, Mr. Watanabe cannot seem to find the right time to tell Mitsuo of his terminal illness, eventually giving up, thus never healing the breach with his son. He is alone. And while Mitsuo and Kazue play their favourite song upstairs in the house, Watanabe wanders his darkened room thinking back on the events in his life that have left him so forlorn. What follows are a remarkable series of flashbacks, tightly controlled by sounds

(“Father” “Mitsuo”) and images (wife’s photograph, baseball bat, close-ups of Watanabe) from the present, that chart the course of Mr. Watanabe’s life from the death of his wife, to the sacrificial offering of his life to the rearing of his one child. These painful memories conclude with Watanabe calling out his son’s name. He starts up the stairs to his son’s bedroom, but the couple turns off their light so Watanabe stops. Framed from above, down the staircase, it is an image of a tunnel that he cannot escape. A fairly long take follows Watanabe in long shot as he winds a clock and then goes to bed, pulling the sheets over his head, his cries muffled and piteous. Kurosawa’s camera cuts to a framed letter of commendation for twenty-five years of service that hangs on the wall above his bed before fading to black.

The whole night sequence is a portrait of Watanabe’s life till now, what the narrator referred to as “boring,” not worth consideration. Yet it is the most affecting part of the film, complicit with the hero’s despair. Visually dark, aurally minimalist, temporally fractured, the sequence is an intimate depiction of Watanabe’s state of mind. It is a portrait of loneliness, regret, somewhat cloying in its emotional intensity. One feels trapped in the room with Watanabe, cloistered in his memories. The fade comes almost with relief for Watanabe’s suffering is unbearable. Except for the opening scene on the street, the sequence’s spatial domain is the house, a place of confinement and family discord where Watanabe suffers his dark night of the soul. His memories are points of light in this darkness, even when they are painful and expressive of his disappointment, for the true disappointment is in his present state, where all of these moments from a hard and seemingly wasted life come to nought. There is no wisdom or sense of accomplishment or gratitude or love to relieve Watanabe’s sadness or emptiness.

## Night Out of the Living Dead

Two brief passages open this section informing us that a couple of weeks have passed, Watanabe has not returned to work, and he has mysteriously drawn out 50,000 yen from his savings account. Watanabe's office is paralyzed because they need his 'signature' to proceed with what work they do accomplish. The shot of his empty chair also suggests that others in the office are just waiting to fill it. Meanwhile his son visits his uncle to seek answers to his father's strange behaviour (the uncle suggests that Watanabe has a mistress). These are merely a prelude.

The main action follows Mr. Watanabe on a one-night odyssey through the bars and dance halls of downtown Tokyo. Whereas the preceding section, with its melodramatic angst concentrated on the inner demons that haunt our lonely hero, this part takes the almost dead Watanabe on a Faustian tour through the Japanese underworld. Though Stephen Prince is rightly attentive to the Brechtian aspects of the narrative (the unidentified narrator, temporal ellipses, screen wipes, contrasting presentational strategies of the narrative), the major Germanic influence here owes more to the expressionist style – the cluttered, decadent *mise en scène* -- epitomized by Joseph von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*; and, self-consciously, Goethe's *Faust*. The shift in style is in accordance with the change in approach.

In a bar, Mr. Watanabe emerges from a dark corner to tell a bon vivant and writer of romances his sad story. He has aged in his brief few-minute absence (but two weeks in the film's narrative) from the screen. He tells the writer: "I've thought of a quick death, but it's hard to die...There seems to be a reason for all this...I'm a stupid fool, that's all." Watanabe has been torturing himself with expensive sake in protest against the life that he has led, but he needs someone to show him a "really good time." The writer responds by offering his services as a

“virtuous” Mephistopheles, but not before making a long speech that thematically underlines the import of this chapter of the film:

I see now misfortune has its good side. Having cancer has opened your eyes to life. Men are such fools! They only realize how beautiful life is when they're face to face with death. And even these people are rare. Some die without knowing what life is. You're a fine man. You're rebelling against it. That's what's impressed me. You've been a slave to life... now you're trying to master it. Man's duty is to enjoy life. It's against God's will not to do so. Man must have a lust for life. Lust is considered immoral, but it isn't. A lust for life is a virtue. Let's go... Let's make up for your wasted life.

And so they embark on a tour of the Tokyo nightlife. This inebriated reverie takes them through a world of neon, crowded streets and bars, strippers, prostitutes, dance halls, jazz clubs, shops, pachinko parlors, a world previously unknown to the stiff and unadventurous Mr. Watanabe. Shot as a whirling carnival of debauchery and drunken play, the camera tracks and pans, following the two men to each brief stop on their tour. The screen is overloaded, bursting at its edges with cars and shop windows and crowds in perpetual chaotic movement. Each location begins and ends with a wipe that breathlessly takes us to another time and place in their sojourn. But the carnival does stop for one crucial moment when Watanabe, cadaverous, a new white hat on his head (after his was stolen by a girl on the street), requests a song of the jaunty piano player in a streamer-infested nightclub. He doesn't quite remember all the words and so Mr. Watanabe sings the song that would become his signature tune, so to speak:

Life is so short  
 Fall in love,  
 Dear maiden  
 While your lips are still red  
 And before your passions cool  
 For there will be no tomorrow.  
 Life is so short  
 Fall in love, dear maiden

While your hair is still black  
And before the fire  
In your heart dies down  
For today will never come again.

This is the song that we later hear him sing when dying (and that had earlier been on the soundtrack of the opening credits of the film). Songs are very specifically placed in the film. The earlier use of the American jazz standard, "Too Young," emphasized the generation gap between Watanabe and his son and daughter in law by suggesting that their desire to live is in direct opposition to his dreary existence. "Life is so Short," associated exclusively with Watanabe, sentimentally expresses his regret that he did not live as fully as he should have; thus it harmonizes with the other song. As well, "Too Young" and other songs that we hear in this section ("Come on Over" sung by the young women picked up by Watanabe and 'Mephisto' and the bits and pieces of pop music we hear in the various nightclubs) are correlated with youth and the vibrant but also frivolous Tokyo night life – both of which seem to be dominated by Western influenced music and mores. Watanabe's performance of his song in fact brings the nightclub to a brief standstill because of its heartfelt rendition, but also because he is like a corpse that has been dragged into the general gaiety (It is also instructive to note that Watanabe's singing of this Japanese 'oldie' is probably the longest 'speech' that the mostly mute Watanabe gives in the entire film). A slightly low angle close up of Watanabe -- tears in his eyes, new hat on his head, framed by the long decorative streamers that hang down in the nightclub, his face darker than the surrounding light – as he croaks out his mournful tune simply adds to his feeling of estrangement; that the empty pursuit of pleasure will not satisfy his needs. The hip, materialistic, Westernized Japan – the New Japan -- cannot assuage his remorse or prevent the nearness of

death. The world offered by his pompous, self-styled Mephistopheles is incapable of redeeming Watanabe's years of drudgery. Even the promise of sexual gratification in the next few scenes cannot hold his interest. The Night Out ends with a puking Watanabe and two young *moga* (modern girls) singing "Come on over, come on over to my house."

The solution to Watanabe's angst cannot be found in a Westernized, trendy Japan. It is simply too empty; but it does, in some sense, reveal his awakened desire to live. The soul searching, misguided as it may be, has begun. His efforts will be rewarded in the film's next section.

### **Dawn of the Dead**

Night becomes day. A weary Mr. Watanabe meets Miss Odagiri, the young woman from his office. She needs his *inkan* (seal) to approve her resignation from city hall. She is bored and wants to find another job. Watanabe befriends her and they spend a happy day together, shopping, eating, playing pachinko, skating, visiting a fairground and the movies. He is charmed by her spontaneity, and as he tells her, her kindness and youthful energy. This whole part is bathed in light. Less frantic than the previous section, Watanabe's 'Dawn' still employs the same montaged editing style, marked by the condensing of brief scenes and transitions via screen wipes. However, its naturalistic style is in direct visual contrast to the Night Out sequence. But even here, Watanabe is portrayed as still lost. He still is incapable of communicating with his son (who now firmly believes he has a mistress and is spending out his inheritance) and hangs onto Miss Odagiri, despite her pleas that she must give her full attention to her new job in a factory making toy bunny rabbits. An increasingly desperate Watanabe forces her to meet him for one last lunch where he tells her of his illness and his desire to do something useful with what time

he has remaining. Trying to be sympathetic but disturbed by his demands on her, Miss Odagiri says: "I only eat and work. I just make toys like this" (winding up the toy bunny). Her words, simple as they are, have a profound effect on our hero. While in the background -- firmly centered in the frame -- a birthday party is in full swing, Mr. Watanabe finally has his moment of epiphany: he decides to go back to work and push through at least one useful project in his capacity as Chief of the Citizen's Section. He, too, can only do what is in his power to do. There is no overarching answer to his existential questions, no reason for living beyond the simple, everyday facts of existence. To the strains of "Happy Birthday," Mr. Watanabe grabs the toy bunny and hurries out of the restaurant. He is reborn. Fade to black.

Arriving at work, the office staff is shocked to see a rejuvenated Mr. Watanabe proposing to help drain the swampy land that the local women have been ineffectively requesting for the last few weeks. Against violins playing "Happy Birthday" on the soundtrack (this time non-diegetic music), Mr. Watanabe tells his staff "if we don't do something about this, it'll never materialize." He grabs his coat and hat and leads his mystified workers out of the main doors, a siren is heard announcing a fire drill in the building, Watanabe walks toward the camera and exits pass the frame, the narrator informs us that "five months later the hero of our story died." A straight cut takes us to a picture of Mr. Watanabe. It is his wake. The film has jumped ahead five months.

### **Life of the Dead**

The shock of this temporal ellipsis is profound -- shock that Kurosawa would so blithely cut down his hero at his moment of rebirth. It is a psychological jump cut: A flash forward comparable to the match cut in *2001 A Space Odyssey* that takes us from prehistoric weapons to



spaceships. Yet it is perfectly in keeping with the dramaturgical practices of the film. Even though the film has maintained enough of a chronological structure to advance Mr. Watanabe's story in an easily comprehensible fashion, it has still managed to vary viewpoints, considerably condense scenes, radically contrast narrative sequences, flash forward and backward with consummate ease. Kurosawa's technical virtuosity is no mere flashiness however, and it cannot be solely understood as part of a Brechtian strategy or *nouveau* Heian stylistics. Rather, the disassembling of (and from) Mr. Watanabe's short happy life is necessitated by the investigative nature of the narrative as well as the desire to present a wide cross section of the social landscape. *Ikiru's* presentational play has permitted a measure freedom to look beyond, through, with Mr. Watanabe. The film is less concerned with him than with what regions of the society he can be used to explore. Thus the temporal edginess of *Ikiru* is perhaps its principal strength, a means of slicing open the smooth spatial shroud that has blinded not only the hero but the society of which he has been such an upstanding though ultimately dissatisfied member. His quest is merely part of the film's own quest to examine ways of being in postwar Japan. That the film inadvertently undermines the centrality of his drive to establish a strong and active sense of self is thus ironic but necessary; not to mention revealing. It is necessitated by the ambitiousness of the film, its grandiose attempt to pursue an existential understanding of modern life, apart from the limited concerns of its hero. Visually, this idea has been reinforced in that Mr. Watanabe has been a figure used to disturb the *mise en scène*, often dividing the frame or framing the focal point of a particular shot. He is not always the main subject of the shot but a limnal figure directing our attention to the background, a way of foregrounding that background.

This section – really the climax of the film – reverses course. The photograph that

accompanies the announcement of Mr. Watanabe's death is continually centered in the frame, the focal point around which the characters revolve. Mr. Watanabe is more present now than at any other time in the film. He appears to hover over the proceedings, visually reinforcing what indeed is occurring in the plot. His wake transforms into a kind of trial for his colleagues, an examination of his motives and actions during the missing five months that ultimately becomes an indictment of their catatonic and corrupted lives. The temporal play that has rippled below the surface of the narrative erupts in full force in this sequence. As the various characters from Mr. Watanabe's office sit, in two orderly lines, perpendicular to the shrine set in the middle (and topped with his photograph), they begin to reminisce about the departed, remembering the remarkable transformation he had obviously undergone in these last months and wondering whether he knew about his impending death. A series of flashbacks, instigated by some aspect of his character or memorable action that he performed, serves to disassemble the initial spatial construction. As the funeral goers grow increasingly intoxicated and their opinions of Mr. Watanabe's actions more contentious and threatening to their own bureaucratic, stunted lives, the formality of the space breaks down. They regroup into smaller units, transgress the invisible boundaries of the ceremony and in the ensuing chaos start to argue, berate, accuse each other and even pity themselves.

It begins simply enough. Mr. Watanabe's family and the city hall staff, including the Deputy Mayor, are assembled for what seems a rather stiff wake for the deceased. A reporter arrives and the Deputy Mayor steps outside to answer questions that accuse him of taking credit for the building of the playground when, in fact, it is Mr. Watanabe who was most responsible for its construction. The underlying assumption is that since Mr. Watanabe has died while sitting

on the swings on a cold wintry night that he may have killed himself in protest against his exclusion from the official ceremonies opening the playground. The Deputy Mayor, rather triumphantly, tells the reporter that Mr. Watanabe died as a result of his inoperable gastric cancer. Returning to his seat, the Deputy Mayor gives a long speech praising the efforts of the various Section Chiefs in assembly at the wake and the efficiency of the bureaucratic apparatus as being instrumental in making the playground a reality. They, in turn, praise his efforts as being fundamental to the success of the enterprise. His speech and the obsequious confirmation offered up by the top officials illustrate the cronyism and hypocrisy at the heart of the political process. This is the corrupt and moribund establishment that had, for twenty-five years, drained the life out of poor Mr. Watanabe. They appear at his death to smother the facts of his life, to render him inconsequential, without significance or even interest and to reassert the hierarchic stasis of the institution that Mr. Watanabe's actions has threatened. The proceedings are interrupted, however, by the arrival of the women and children of Kuroe-cho (in whose district the playground was built) who walk through the middle of the perfectly aligned mourners and in genuine grief, cry for the dearly departed Mr. Watanabe. Shots of the grieving women are intercut with individual close-ups of the now embarrassed, uncomfortable officials. A further series of near jump cuts show Mr. Watanabe's photograph in close-up before cutting to a long shot of the grieving women and then returning to a medium shot of the Deputy Mayor looking down. This is the first significant disturbance of the spatial arrangement of the wake and it is reinforced by the editing strategy unleashed by the presence of the mothers and children who genuinely mourn the death of Mr. Watanabe.

Soon after the women leave, the Deputy Mayor and his entourage hurriedly make their

departure. Only Mr. Watanabe's immediate office colleagues and family remain. It is at this point that the conflicting attitudes within the office about the last few months of Mr. Watanabe's life begin to rise to the surface. Questions about who is really responsible for building the playground soon become flashbacks that show Watanabe's determination, patient persistence and humility as he goads, begs and sometimes shames the others into action. We see Mr. Watanabe standing in the rain surveying the site; staring down the *yakuza* faction that wanted to appropriate the site for a bar; being fussed over by the neighbourhood women who see him as their champion, his eyes aglow as he gazes at the progress being made; leading a delegation of residents into the mayor's office; literally refusing to be casually dismissed by the Deputy Mayor; working and day and night against all levels of the city hall bureaucracy to accomplish his task.

The Mr. Watanabe that emerges from these portraits is fearless. One character comments that "his zeal seemed even a bit fanatical." He is indeed driven. To such an extent, in fact, that his actions tear through the tangled stitching that so effectively ties each bureaucrat into his own cocoon, into the grand cobweb of passivity, inertia, slow inevitable decay. Not only is he able to push through a worthy project against other competing, cynical choices, but his dedication stirs up the feelings of helplessness and dread that are close to the surface in his own colleagues. As one character bitterly complains, "We live by stealing valuable time. People complain about city corruption, but its nothing compared to our tremendous waste of time." In many respects, Mr. Watanabe is no longer the average salaryman but a heroic figure beyond the ken of his fellow workers. As Ohara, an office veteran, comments, "compared to Watanabe, we're human trash."

In death, Mr. Watanabe has risen above the meek conformity of his associates. Perhaps this

is the result of an idealized viewpoint brought on by his death or alcohol, but it seems more likely that it is an authentic response to his extraordinary behaviour in the months leading up to his demise. In any event, Watanabe represents someone who has triumphed over a system that has no moral authority over them but within which they are emasculated, unbearably bound. But before the group completely retreats into mawkish self-pity, the policeman who had discovered Watanabe's body arrives with his now iconic white hat. He relates, guiltily, that he had seen Mr. Watanabe sitting on the swings singing. Watanabe seemed so happy that he merely let him be. A final flashback takes us to Mr. Watanabe singing 'Life is so Short,' the camera tracks left as he swings, it is snowing, a harp accompanies the tune, a cut to a long shot dissolves to a close-up of Mr. Watanabe's photo then a long shot of the mourners. The sounds carry over to the wake as if the dead has come back to life. Another cut finally takes us outside the room and we see the ensemble through a window as Watanabe's son cries in the hallway in the foreground – remorseful at his mistreatment and misunderstanding of his father. Another cut shows a close-up of Watanabe's watch and the bunny rabbit toy he had taken from Miss Odagiri; both emblematic of Mr. Watanabe's motives. The now thoroughly drunken guests leave, pledging that they will work as hard and conscientiously as the dearly departed. Fade to black.

### **Return of the Dead**

This brief section is simply the nail in the coffin. A fade in takes us to a shot of the new section chief, Mr. Ohno, sitting at Watanabe's old desk. Two piles of paperwork frame him. Someone comes to complain about a blocked sewage pipe and he dismisses him to the Public Works section in exactly the same way that Watanabe had at the start of the film. A young worker – the one who has most idealized Mr. Watanabe's dedication and hard work – stands in a

rage at this obvious return to form but soon sits down, bowing his head. The camera tilts down with him so that the screen is filled with paper. A wipe takes us to the bridge above the playground where this young man stands looking down. A shot of the swings pans up to the bridge and the sky as he walks away. 'Life is so Short' plays on the soundtrack as the film ends.

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No other Japanese film from the 1950s has the remarkable spatial and temporal structures of *Ikiru*. Though it bears comparison with *Rashomon* in the dialogical play of varying points of view, *Ikiru* is less concerned with philosophical issues of relative truth and more with engaging a wider spectrum of postwar Japanese society and the position of the individual within it. David Desser, in an essay entitled "*Ikiru*: Narration as a Moral Act," argues that the film is a reworking of themes and formal concerns seen in earlier films, *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidore Tenshi*, 1948) and *Rashomon* (1950):

The problem Kurosawa wanted to deal with in the earlier film is thematic: What does it mean to be a hero in modern times, under ordinary circumstances? He cast Shimura Takashi [Watanabe in *Ikiru*] in the lead role, the drunken angel of the title, as a doctor in postwar (contemporary) Japan struggling against a polluted environment (a fetid pool in a slum neighborhood) to cure his patients of T.B...

Thematically, *Ikiru* may be said to continue to be addressing the problem raised by *Rashomon*: how to live in an existential world, a world rendered meaningless by the death of certainty, by the death, that is, of God. We note that the woodcutter of *Rashomon* who decides to take the baby into his own family (by which action the priest has his faith restored in mankind after the horror he has previously witnessed) is portrayed by Shimura Takashi – the same actor who stars in *Ikiru*. Kurosawa uses *Rashomon* to explain the meaninglessness of the world, and presents a solution only at the end, in a scene not found in any of the source stories for the film. *Ikiru*, on the other hand, begins in a world rendered meaningless, and the bulk of the film addresses the question of action in such a universe. Stylistically, Kurosawa explores two interconnected notions raised first in

*Rashomon*: point of view and narrativity.<sup>174</sup>

Desser goes on to discuss the importance of the narrator in the film as a kind of *katsuben* or *benshi* (the famous ‘title readers’ of silent movie days who read – and often editorialized – the intertitles for the theater audience) who “*stands apart from the action*” and who, like in the plays of Chikamatsu, “makes moral judgments and guides our feelings and perceptions with the aim of teaching a lesson.”<sup>175</sup> Thus we have the narrator – unidentified and omniscient -- commenting on Watanabe’s boring and meaningless existence as an authorial presence embedded in the film as a self-reflexive aesthetic. This opens the door to the varying narrative strategies that will characterize the film and that will culminate in flashbacks offered up by Watanabe’s colleagues in the extended wake sequence. For Desser, these are, unlike the suspect first person accounts in *Rashomon*, accounts that, at one level, can be trusted, but, in another sense, essentially reveal “the process by which people construct a world-view out of their own inner needs.” Though he never explicitly says this, the accounts of Watanabe’s extraordinary actions in the last five months of his life are ultimately attempts to contain the threat posed by Watanabe’s courageous and single-minded behavior. It is part of a spatial process, a weakening of the individualistic power represented by Watanabe that has, against much opposition and inertia, accomplished something of value; something beneficial to the community and the individual.

I have extended and reinterpreted Desser’s argument here because he seems to stop short of his own thesis. The moral action implicit in narration, which he is intent on exploring, becomes somewhat fuzzy. Rather than follow through on the implications of the narrative (I

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<sup>174</sup> David Desser, “*Ikiru*: Narrativity as Moral Act,” in *Reframing Japanese Film Authorship, Genre, History*, eds. Arthur Nalletti, jr. and David Desser (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992), p. 59.

would say temporal) positions in the film, Desser slips into a discussion of the question of heroism, the ethical choices Kurosawa's heroes must make. It is not an aberrant slippage for it lies at the heart of the film's thematics: How to live in the modern world. But by recasting the question as part of a spatial-temporal dialectic, the issue of form and content can be more stringently brought to bear on the existential questions at the center of the film. *Ikiru's* narrational ploys include an ethical component – how point of view expresses the impossibility of a purely objective stance and the concurrent use of viewpoint to illuminate as well as blind one to the 'truth' of what is at hand – but, at least in this context, is probably more reflective of the attempt to paint a more grand portrait of Japanese society and its times.

The sheer breadth of the film suggests an epic narrative; not in its story, however, but in its presentational play, its stylistic rendering of the story. Mr. Watanabe's life is like an object microscopically examined until its secrets can be revealed. It is variations on a simple melody building to a grand symphony. The music that emerges is not only the small voice at its core – a voice that resonates with any other in other times and places – but the orchestrated fullness of the historical moment and the specificity of place, Japan circa 1952 (the year in which the film was made). The simplicity of Mr. Watanabe's story is a necessary device for the focus on the act of storytelling. As such, the film can be seen as a parable whose moral intent is to offer some small ray of hope that would demonstrate to its audience the possibility of freedom, of a way of being that would uphold the dignity of the individual but not destroy the social fabric that binds us all together. More specifically, the film argues that the two ideals are not mutually incompatible. Mr. Watanabe's personal salvation can be beneficial, indeed may be dependent on what he can

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, p. 62.



do for the good of his community. The brilliance of the film's stylistic play is that it self-consciously utilizes Mr. Watanabe to illustrate the dilemma of being, while still standing apart from him so that the audience can directly apprehend the issue. As Stephen Prince notes, Kurosawa's dispassionate stance distances the viewer from the hero at the same time that it opens the discursive arena of the film.

The spectator is not allowed to identify emotionally with the hero, to live through him, just as Watanabe was not allowed to do this with Toyo [Miss Odagiri]. For Kurosawa, the terms of responsible living are far more demanding than what a merely compassionate response will enable. His hero must be disabused of this response, as the film must disabuse its audience of the expectation that an unmediated rapport with the character will unfold. As Brecht said, empathy can create the wish but not the capability to emulate a hero. Thus, empathy, as an interpersonal ethic and an aesthetic form, must be abandoned.... But the kaleidoscopic structure of the film also permits Kurosawa to fashion – if not closure, then – at least a new and more extensive bounding of the social challenges with which the forms of the earlier films grappled. The problem was to find a space where the individual could stand that would not entail a blindness to the social world and a collapse into selfishness or solipsism.<sup>176</sup>

Within the context of postwar Japan -- in the year that would see the end of the Occupation -- Mr. Watanabe's existential question-and-answer certainly reverberates at a national level. It is *nihonjinron* discourse at this most crucial time. The turbulence and deprivation that characterized the immediate postwar years were coming to an end (and Japan was perched on the edge of an economic growth that would be the envy of the world), but the ideological ramifications of the changes wrought since 1945 would remain an on-going discourse that engaged many artists and intellectuals across many fields. *Ikiru* is the most substantive cinematic representation of this discourse.

One of the most immediately striking aspects of the film's discursive strategies and

thematic intent however, is how seemingly westernized it is. In this regard, Prince is right to insist on the Brechtian influences in Kurosawa's work; that he "is not interested in speaking about the sadness of Watanabe's death or, in a more traditionally Japanese manner, in adopting an attitude of *mono no aware*, a restrained melancholy over the transience of all things."<sup>177</sup> Hence a consequence of Kurosawa's approach is that the film seems a fairly undiluted version of existentialist ideas prevalent in the postwar era, both in Japan and the West. Unlike the response to this individual and collective crisis offered by a film like *Harp of Burma*, one that would espouse a particularly Japanese form of Buddhism, *Ikiru* offers no 'nativist' religious consolation for the moral and existential impasse that the hero reaches. Indeed, the Buddhist priest is conspicuous by his absence in Watanabe's long and eventful wake. (Even when Watanabe opens the shrine to his wife, it triggers painful memories but do not lead to a moment of Shinto prayer to the dearly departed.) This avenue of escape, or salvation, is simply not part of Kurosawa's vision of modern Japanese society. The flashbacks (brief, imagistic rather than mini-narratives) in this particular sequence do not so much suggest a time when everything was 'right,' when there was a harmonic balance in the hero's life but are more focused on the present as an expression of Watanabe's psychological and emotional torment. His interior life, so to speak, has been denuded of any religious reference, thus suggesting his separation (alienation?) from a religious impulse that had been intimately bound up in greater nationalistic and, in the recent past, imperialist concerns. As far as this observation may be true, Watanabe's quest for meaning in his life is emphatically materialist and individualistic, western. The film in fact has a universal

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<sup>176</sup> Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Peinceton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 112.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, p. 112.

appeal in that it can easily be read as a search for meaning in modern life, quite apart from its specificity as a Japanese production engaged with specifically Japanese issues. And, to be fair to the film, that may still apply to life (both here and in Japan) in our own time.

In support of such a conception of Mr. Watanabe's tribulations, and within an understanding of the temporal in Japanese cinema and society upheld here, the film's temporally disjunctive narration continually associates the hero with the effects of this fracturing of time within the well-manicured garden of Japanese society. If, as I have been arguing, time is associated with the new, the foreign, the documented facts of all too recent history and that the ideological preservation of the New Japan is predicated on a suppression or at least neutralizing contextualization of the potentially disturbing incarnations of time, then Mr. Watanabe is a threat greater than Godzilla to the spatial harmony engendered by this process. His memories, as well as the others memories of him and the narrational approaches employed to tell his story are all temporal strategies that slash through the usual holistic grip of mainstream illusionist practice. Watanabe's temporal threat is given a visual correlative in that he becomes, in the course of the movie, a destabilizing, elusive, mute presence, hovering on the margins of the frame or, alternatively, a brooding presence dominating and dividing the ordered formalities of the *mise en scène*. He is death. He is time.

This 'othering' of the hero, however, reflects an uncertainty in the film, or perhaps simply the extreme difficulty of living authentically in/with modernity. The strain of Watanabe's attempt to live heroically in accordance with his personal conscience is such that he can no longer be human, Japanese. Thus, apart from the image of Watanabe-as-Ancient Mariner, his appearances and disappearances from the film signify his troubling relationship to a society that

he cannot abide; and that cannot abide him. As Prince astutely observes, “Watanabe will be manifest as a textual gap that the narrative tries to fill in and reclaim by inventing hypotheses for his behavior. This effort at reclamation is motivated by the same urgency as the defusing of a bomb, for Watanabe will come to represent a powerfully subversive example to established society.”<sup>178</sup>

The import of Watanabe as a “subversive” figure (representative of the film’s temporal assault and, with his death-like grin, his dark and disturbing presence in the *mise en scène*) is a double-edged one, however. His banishment from the polite – though hypocritical -- discourse of the society also calls into question the values that he comes to represent. The Western-influenced existentialism, associated with the hero, is, ironically, not represented by a strong figure but a dying (Tadao Sato comments that he defined by his disease) character whose last desperate act, his short happy life, is spent haunting the corridors of city hall to salvage one useful result from his meaningless and unhappy existence. That this may be merely an accident of the political moment (Watanabe’s replacement, Mr. Ohno, asserts that the playground was ultimately built only as an act of political expediency in an election year, not through the pathetic efforts of Mr. Watanabe) is evidence of the darkness at the edge of the frame of this dense and ambivalent film. Rather than a heroic figure, Watanabe’s actions may represent the inability of heroic action. His small victory merely highlights the near impossibility of any change in the corrupting and impassive machinery of the state. In many ways, this effect has more to do with a particular Japanese sensibility -- the ubiquitous *mono no aware* as well as a common phrase of resignation in Japanese society, “*shigata ga nai*” (it can’t be helped). As such, it is a world apart from the

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, p 103.

heroic resistance championed by Brechtian theatre. But perhaps even more depressing is the fate of heroic individualism (at the heart of Western Existentialism) in a Japanese context. It would seem that Western ideals are as equally ineffectual as a return to some idealized notion of Buddhist self sacrifice. Dying on a wintry night while singing his sentimental ditty, Watanabe may have escaped the crushing weight of an unbearable modernity that we the living must still carry. Is this not truly a moment of *mono no aware*? *Shigata ga nai*.

What could be read as an example of Brechtian epic theatre has imperceptibly slipped into Japanese tragedy. The film's climatic coda, the shock cut and the resulting wake that comprises a good third of the film, dramatizes without a clear cut resolution the difficulties of championing the ideals represented by Watanabe in the context of 1950s Japan. His 'victory,' achieved by haunting the corridors of power, ends with his ghostly presence spilling onto the *tatami* mats of the funeral parlour. What ultimately motivated his actions, one acknowledged by his colleagues, is the pressure of time, of what little time he had left in his life. The nearness of death liberated Watanabe from the everyday accommodations necessary to maintain one's position in a hierarchical and oppressive social environment. The others do not have this luxury. They must return to the office the next day and the next day to watch their lives slowly leak away. Such a bleak vision where one understands the process of one's dissolution but cannot act or imagine any way out of the endless labyrinth is all too characteristic of Japanese attitudes in life as in art. The 'life is fleeting' transience that gives such enormous philosophical succor to traditional Japanese attitudes still lurks in the soul of the average person in this modernized, brave new Japan. There is a strong fatalism that pervades the work of even a strongly Western-influenced director like Kurosawa, a recognition that the spatial inertia characteristic of Japanese

society – this slow moving juggernaut – will continue its interminable roll over its supplicants, crushing them in its wake. To grasp this reading, it is important to bear in mind that Watanabe's rebellion is not simply against an impersonal and empty modern existence, nor solely a humanist text meant to restore the dignity of man against the inexorable abstractions of modernity but a political text that speaks to the particular history of the nation; though its voice is full of trepidation. Watanabe's refusal to conform must still be viewed within Japan's modern history.

*Nihonjinron* was not merely a faddish narcissism but the result of a crisis of modernity in Japan. *Ikiru*, as such, articulates the contradictions and difficulties of this *nihonjinron* discourse. Its examination of what it means 'to live' in a modern society is critical of the entrenched social structures but also reveals the near impossibility of breaking free of them. This can be equally said about the representations of the dilemma and is perhaps the main reason why the film's existentialist vision is so dark and, within a Japanese context, problematic. The strain of portraying a character that rebels against his prescribed role in life runs through the film as a subtext worth examination.

Watanabe's silence: He is like a silent movie actor in a sound film. In a social context, it is quintessentially Japanese that the loudmouth is not only lacking in social grace, but is obviously a fool. To express one's true opinions in a public sphere is to risk losing the approbation of one's superiors and would suggest an inability to comprehend the subtle dialectic that such social discourse entails. It is better to remain silent or to mouth acceptable platitudes that maintain social harmony but for which no one will hold you accountable. It is more appropriate to suggest one's displeasure indirectly or in the appropriate context (such as an office party after a few drinks so you can claim to have been drunk). Even then, one risks much unless

one can demonstrate due respect and the support of others. To go it alone is to really go out on a limb. To mix metaphors further, the old Japanese saying that “the nail that sticks out will be hammered down” would also express this pervasive attitude. For this reason, Watanabe’s defiance is, by Western standards, muted. He must act stealthily, with patience and perseverance so that he can demonstrate his determination but without alienating those whose favour he seeks to win. Watanabe, in fact, goes further in that he practices due humility to everyone, superior and inferior alike. His victory comes not from a convincing or seductive rhetoric or from a position of strength but from his weakness – his not caring about the long-term personal consequences. His motive, of course, is that he knows he will soon die and has no reason to fear any consequences. In this respect, his sacrifice may not be as heroic as Dr. Serizawa in *Godzilla* or Mizushima in *Harp of Burma*. The film, however, does not pretend to make him out as more heroic than he is. It merely expresses the enormous difficulty of doing anything in line with one’s personal conscience in a society so dedicated to suppressing any personal expression. To realistically portray Watanabe’s challenge to the powers that be, the film requires his silence. His mute presence accrues power by virtue of his constancy, his dedication to the project of draining the swamp and building a playground. His character then cannot be verbose or powerful for to be so would break a cultural understanding of what comprises realistic behavior. The film would have to be a satire or a comedy or worse yet a misguided fantasy. Instead, to maintain its dramatic authenticity Watanabe must remain silent. But voiceless, Watanabe is an empty vessel that can be filled with all manner of interpretation (as the events at his wake demonstrate). He can be a conduit through which much pent-up frustrations and excuses can be channeled; cathartic rather than challenging.

It also serves as means of delaying any equally heroic action. For the price of this silence, even if it is not genuine, is to allow the social structures that be continued dominance. Very few, if anyone, would have the courage to risk such public ostracism. Watanabe can only do it (barely) standing at death's door. The same principles that guided people's actions through the whole militaristic period (specifically from the 1930s but with its roots in many other eras of Japanese history) -- the obsessive desire for loyalty and public conformity so that no opposing or singular voice could be heard -- are still in play here. Through Watanabe, the film both opens and closes the door on any real action that could be taken to radically alter the underlying structures of the society. His silence – ultimately represented by his death! – underlines the power of the social forces that still hold a firm grip on Japanese society.

Another aspect of this apparently interminable sense of entrapment is the film's failure to acknowledge the historical moment. Watanabe's dilemma, as I have been describing it here, seems purely cultural. We are told that he has been employed in the bureaucracy for 25 years, that the only reason he stayed was to provide a reliable income for his son's upbringing, that he has been beaten down by what is an unchanging and ultimately debilitating process. It is immutable, almost a natural occurrence. The film has elided the remarkable events that have affected Japanese society in this period of time. Only one shot during Watanabe's night out on the town shows the presence of foreigners in Japan (and they are more representative of a world that Watanabe has little experience of, than an acknowledgment of the Occupation). And only a quick flashback to his son going off to war suggests the 15 years of strife that Japan had all too recently endured (and even here it is in the context of his personal sense of the emotional distance between Watanabe and his son; not about the war itself). Thus the Japan evoked by the



film seems relatively unchanged from when Watanabe starting working at city hall. Even Ozu's Japan bears more of the marks of contemporary history.

The absence of a historical context makes Watanabe's rebellion – if we can really call it that – all the more doomed. His actions could be considered a futile gesture against a culturally sanctioned conformity that is endemic (transcending history) to the society. In any event, the film suggests, the only result can be a fatalistic shrug. Without the other necessary element of Brechtian praxis, the insistence on a historical dialectic, the distancing devices are denuded of any call to arms. The temporal play of the film evokes the multifaceted nature of the hero's motivations and the problematics of any opposition to the reigning spatial regime, but cannot glimpse the possibility of change. It is bound to fail. *Shigata ga nai*.

This ambivalence lurks at the heart of the film. Whereas it paints a devastating portrait of a moribund society that crushes the individuality of its adherents, its lack of historical consciousness undermines the possibility of a real ideological understanding of the postwar existential condition as well as offering up any possibility for change. The answer to the film's title – 'To Live' – seems to be that it is almost impossible to live within the present conditions that characterize Japanese society. There is no escape except through death (and even here, the wake serves as a representation of spatial closure, of the attempt to erase the heroic gesture). Watanabe can only be heroic in the process of dying. Alternatively, it could be that we must always live with the nearness of death; a concept prevalent in Zen Buddhism and Western existentialism. Either way, the dilemma of the individual in society still remains. Watanabe's existential crisis is a personal one against an apparently unchanging society. It is a corollary of the social and historical dilemma, almost a parallel discourse, but not a true representation of the

historical moment. The failures in his life that Watanabe confronts are conformity and cowardliness. He is able to repair these, somewhat retroactively, through his deathbed conversion to a short happy life of community service. But the existential problem as an ideological crisis -- this cowardly conformity is directly implicated in the nationalist madness of prewar and wartime Showa era Japan -- is elided by the film. Such lack of historical consciousness is a common one shared by much of the postwar *nihonjinron* discourse. That the quest for a viable and dignified sense of self has deep ideological significance is implicit but seldom clearly articulated as being historically contingent by any of the texts. At another level, however, even fifty years later, Kurosawa's evocation of a Japanese society stifled by the repression of individual expressiveness and the passive conformity of its citizenry remains prescient. *Ikiru* still feels authentic. What does that say about the notion of change in Japanese society?

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1950s postwar Japanese cinema, or at least those discussed here (which I would argue are a fair if not quantitative sampling), reflects much of the ideological stresses of the period. The quest for a way of being -- both at an individual and national level -- would be at the very least implicit in many of the important films during the decade following the war. However, they seem incapable of directly confronting Japan's past thus compounding the fact that so much of the past remains. The New Japan was undoubtedly different: peaceful, prosperous, increasingly westernized, capitalist, ruled by the politically conservative Liberal Democrats (but certainly not dominated by any rabid right-wing nationalists) and contested by a formidable socialist bloc (especially opposed to the renewal of the Security Pact with America that ensured Japan's

foreign policies would be essentially controlled by the former Occupier). But the nation was also equally unchanged: the Emperor, having renounced his divinity, still remained on the throne as a “symbol” of the nation, and a coterie of wartime bureaucrats and industrialists managed to reassert their power and positions. In what has always seemed to be mysterious to the outsider (and perhaps to the Japanese themselves), Japan stabilized and began recreating itself as a major economic superpower. It was not without conflict or failures, but is probably the most remarkable postwar rebirth of any nation on the planet.

The interplay of historical change and national identity is never simple. Japan’s experience is not unique in this regard, but it is exceptional given the intensity of both sides of the equation. Even *Ikiru*, which presents the most self-consciously political and aesthetically powerful challenge to the deeply ingrained sense of self (particularly as a critique of conformity and corruption) in Japanese society, fails to address the question of historical change and thus can only portray the near futility of any meaningful or lasting action against its repressiveness. But one extraordinary aspect of a sense of national self in Japan is that it hinges on the continuity of tradition in the midst of a full-bodied embrace of the new and the foreign. In this sense, Kurosawa has utilized Western existentialist ideas (and implicit notions about the construction of the individual), Brechtian aesthetics, Doestoevskian attitudes (as Richie claims) and Hollywood cinema without losing one iota of his ‘Japaneseness.’ Kurosawa’s critique of conformity and its repercussions in Japanese society that have led to claims of Kurosawa as representative of a transitional period, an internationalized director, an intertextual figure, may still miss the mark altogether. For what we may see as conformity, in all its pejorative glory, is at the root of a sense of *national* self. Conformity, passivity, acquiescence, dependence are the shadowy side of an

overwhelming sense of community, of what Japanese society sees as the mere rendering onto Caesar the things that are....

The dialectic of *giri/ninjo* (public duty/personal desire) and *tatemae/honne* (public expression/true feeling) hinges on this particular dilemma. They are dramatized in all the films I have examined thus far and certainly predate the cinema. It is inherently a political question. What is interesting, however, is not the question, but the answer. It is always the same. Watanabe's wrestling with this is especially poignant because of the constraint of time; he has only so much time left to give the 'correct' answer. That the question is being asked as Japan emerges from a turbulent and critical period of Japanese history, brought on by the defeat, Occupation and restructuring of the nation, gives it added significance. That it is being asked without acknowledgment of the historical moment is thus peculiar. Perhaps it is not even necessary. A contemporary audience would undoubtedly understand the implications of the question beyond the particular individual? Or does the lack of a political and historical emphasis always ensure that the question is cultural and existential and thus the answer is always the same: the nation, the community, the Japanese race, despite its faults, must be preserved. That Watanabe cannot effect any fundamental change. He can only achieve a small victory; even, quintessentially, through a lovely aesthetic tradition of victory through defeat. To do otherwise would be to risk a powerful and deeply ingrained trope of the Japanese sensibility. Instead, the Watanabe who is investigated through the various stories and flashbacks at the wake is in the process of reification, of being reborn as a revered ancestor. His son will clap his hands together and pray to him every morning for he is worth such veneration because he has, ironically, in his behavior, served to prop up the establishment. He has, as the malicious Deputy Mayor asserts,

shown that the system does work. And yet...

And yet, *Ikiru* has problematized this dilemma. Watanabe's sacrifice is double-edged. He has accomplished what the system pretends it does but doesn't. The film exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of a decadent institution by allowing its hero a moment of grace, of personal satisfaction. But, this may be exactly how the Japanese economic miracle occurred. Not through the brilliance of the system, but the selflessness of its citizenry -- the sacrificial salaryman who would literally work himself to death to 'rebirth' the nation. This is the call of individualism: each and every one must work to "rebuild the homeland," as the voice over says at the conclusion of *Godzilla*. There is no personal salvation except through the success of the nation/group. To assuage the nothingness of an endlessly insistent time, the perpetual becoming of being, we can only offer up ourselves to the spatial arrangement, the powers that be, so that this red circle, this red sun in the surrounding whiteness may once more be raised.

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In all of the films examined thus far, I have focused on their relationship to the national postwar ideology. Central to my understanding is the assertion (always in doubt, however) that the sense of national identity cannot be solely accounted for by the usual socioeconomic and historical readings. That there is a wider embrace of religious and cultural values (mostly associated with the spatial, but not necessarily so) that both undermines and supports the interplay of ideology and history (themselves associated with the temporal but having a spatial dimension in that they are often represented by the foreign, the spatial other). My reading of these cinematic *nihonjinron* texts -- or reading of them *as nihonjinron* texts -- would suggest that

central to the maintenance of a strong national identity – the sense of self as being coterminous with the nation – is the sometimes subtle, sometimes brutal envelopment of the temporal by the spatial. The films exclude history and/or displace or misread their historical understanding so that the cultural values can be reasserted and celebrated. This spatial domain should not be understood as purely cultural or even as simply ethical, but as a sacred territory that must be maintained for the psychic integrity of the citizen; so that s/he will be able to contribute to the rebuilding of the nation after the war. Thus my emphasis on the religious traditions and contemporary philosophies best articulated by the two giants of twentieth Japanese philosophy: Kitaro Nishida and Keiji Nishitani. Their reinterpretation of ‘nativist’ religious traditions by inculcating the work of Western philosophers (particularly Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger) not only reflects some of the same more prosaic movements in Japanese society (and cinema), but also provided the discursive ground for support of the war effort; and, in the postwar context, promoted and celebrated a notion of self integral to the creation and sustenance of the New Japan. This religiously -- and by extension aesthetically and culturally – inspired conception of selfhood could remain blind to the facts of say Japanese aggression during the war, while embracing (in the postwar) the self-serving notion of Japan and Japanese as a purely pacifist, peace-loving race, spiritually inclined, its past a mere aberration brought on by a small military faction responding (badly) to economic pressures from outside. The stresses and strains of the postwar era were such that this spatial praxis had a certain urgency: spiritual sustenance and historical blindness could only be maintained for so long before economic need and political turmoil, the ruptured fabric of the imperial regime, and a host of other more mundane and pressing demands on the citizenry, would undermine this ideological edifice.

*Ikiru* is one of the masterpieces of this era, perched on the fine line of critiquing and supporting the New Japan that was being collectively created out of the ashes of the war. Its pessimistic view of contemporary Japanese society is a precursor to some of the later films in the decade – Kurosawa’s own *Record of a Living Being* (1955) and *The Lower Depths* (1957), Kon Ichikawa’s *Fires on the Plains* (1957), Masayuki Kobayashi three-part anti-war film, *Human Condition* (1958-60), among others – that critically investigate Japan’s past and present. Indeed, as the wartime years receded, 1950s Japanese cinema would become increasingly radicalized, both formally and politically. With the ascendance of such filmmakers as Nagisa Oshima, Shohei Imamura, Seijun Suzuki, Susumu Hani, Yasuzo Masumura and others in the 1960s, a break with the past, really a rejection of what was characterized as politically naive, ideologically retrograde and aesthetically stifling would be enacted. Equally important was the breakdown of the old studio system that played such a crucial role in resuscitating the film industry in the early postwar years; a decay similar to Hollywood in the 1960s where the impact of television and corporate takeovers spelled the demise of the established structures of mainstream filmmaking. The resulting chaos – and brilliance – of this era’s films, while self-consciously antithetical to the cinema of the early postwar, was still linked to it. Both Ichikawa and Kurosawa continued to work, while others had apprenticed under famous directors from the studio era. But the deaths of Ozu and Mizoguchi did signal the end of an era – some say *The Golden Age of Japanese Cinema* – as well as a marking shift in the stylistics and tone to the more experimental New Wave films that followed.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Sato writes that Yasuzo Masumura, whose film *Giants and Toys* (1958) favoured aggressive characters and exaggerated action, contrary to the ‘old directorial school’ seen as “emotional, passive and introspective” responded to his critics with verve. His remarks suggest some of my critique of *Ikiru*::

Rather than follow the historical developments represented by this turn in Japanese cinema however, and despite the obvious value of the films themselves, I would like to (sadly) perform my own jump cut and focus attention on films made around the time of the end of the postwar: the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s. It is not the purview of this work to give an historical account of postwar Japanese cinema but more to meditate on the relationship of history to national identity, of time to space. The work (in English) of, in particular, Tadao Sato, David Desser, Donald Richie and Joseph Anderson among others is useful for filling in this near 40-year gap. To better appreciate the spatial-temporal dialectic, I will examine three films in my concluding chapter that reflect a changed Japan, or at least a Japan that viewers of the earlier films may not even recognize: A Japan prosperous to a degree undreamt of by those who struggled through the war and its aftermath; a Japan without precedence; a Japan that may not be Japan at all.

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“Masumura antagonized some critics who claimed that he sacrificed reality, emotion, and atmosphere for exaggerated behavior. He retaliated in an essay, saying that these qualities had been overvalued in Japanese film previously. In films with “reality,” social pressures were delineated in detail, and while they made the viewer aware of “the evils of society,” they suggested only resignation. When the film-maker sympathized with this resignation and shed gentle tears over the defeated, his films were praised for their “emotion” and “atmosphere.” Masumura refused to recognize this denouement, stating that he ignored social environment on purpose so as to portray people who act like maniacs, thereby calling attention to the ego and expressing himself by exaggerating it.”



## CHAPTER EIGHT:

### POST POSTWAR: Another Time Another Place

It would be too inelegant, but the heading should really be followed by a question mark. Thirty years after the films already discussed, Japan seems a completely different nation. Thus the three films I will briefly investigate are indicative of the changes in Japanese society and may, in fact, represent the products of a fundamentally altered place. They also demonstrate, however, how past concerns still resonate within the Japanese imagination. Between this juxtaposition resides the question of 'National Cinema.' The (dis)continuities wrought by historical change, the syntagmatic/paradigmatic dialectic, the spatio-temporal interplay all call into question the extent to which the concept of nation can be fruitfully applied as a means of filmic analysis. As such, this chapter is primarily concerned with examining these films in light of an altered time and place; that is, with the preceding time period firmly in mind.

It is also an opportunity to investigate my own (hypo) thesis. The assertion that space corrals time as a fundamental praxis in postwar Japan, one that extends through the society and its cinema, can be reexamined in this 'new' spatio-temporal landscape. Though it would seem obvious that Japan by the 1980s is significantly different from the Japan of the 1950s, how fundamental a shift remains an open question; but even if it is, does it necessarily mean that it is a different nation? In speaking of change, we are speaking of the movement of time, the lived durational experience of time. That even as spatial arrangements strive to contain the shock of the new, or harness its dynamism, each moment builds on itself, accumulating toward an altered

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(Sato, p. 212).

reality. The spatial desire to hold this force in a centripetal movement does not preclude changes of the oscillating object. Things change and no discursive or institutional arrangement can disavow the opposing centrifuge. Japan is not exceptional in this way, all nations maintain this gravitational dynamic, are always on the edge of this chaos, this loosening of the bonds that effectively hold a sense of national self within clearly limiting boundaries. What may be exceptional is the make up of this force field. Whereas the spatial contours of most nations are asserted from a historical and ideological (that is political, economic, discursive) sense of community, an imagined and *real* conflux that creates a powerful ideational commitment to nation, Japan would appear to subsume this within an even more encompassing metaphysic. Instead of a postmodern model that recognizes the individual's partial independence from the sense of nation, that a sense of self may be equally contested by other religious, gender, racial, economic, even sexual or transnational affiliations. Japanese society may in fact represent a fundamental intrusion into this private self. It permits these other ways of being, these 'occupations' (except perhaps, at this time, the racial), but they are enfolded into a national space that is, for want of a better term, religiously secular. By this, I mean a metaphysical conception of the world that recognizes the emptiness of both space and time, of the illusory nature of the world, a void that is filled with a relational arrangement brokered by the powers that be. The individual/self is not some atomized whole negotiating the tides of history or the ideological constructions of nation/not nation, but can only be understood as a relational being, existing, if you will, outside of itself. And this 'outside' is within Japan's inside. The Japanese sense of self is exactly that, Japanese. It changes, it ages, it can permit all manner of ideological, material,

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structural formations, even a surprising heterogeneity that one would think impossible, but remains bordered, encapsulated within a sense of self that is national. This is, I repeat, a spatial construct. It is not necessarily repressive -- though it often has been -- but a spatial dynamic more perfectly realized in the confusions of modernity (and postmodernity) than current national theories appreciate.

As I have been arguing in preceding chapters, a key element of this cosmologically imagined/constructed nation is that the metaphysical sanction has been diffused and diluted into aesthetics, ethics and traditional practices so it takes on a secular appearance. Its power comes also from its silence, its refusal to be conceptualised as a language; preferring to be practiced, embodied as an experiential response to the 'nothingness' of the world. Indeed, one could go further and say -- along with Brian Moeran and Graham Parkes -- that it is, ironically, the source of eroticism and violence. For out of this seemingly abstracted understanding of no-thingness -- the Buddhist concept holds that if one opens up to this illusory state then the 'thing-ness' of the world can be recognized -- is the paradoxical fact of nation. In practice, instead of such a radical openness, this philosophical idea/praxis must be marked, physically branded onto the subject so that it can enter into the nation space. Thus the permitting of various other 'penetrations,' but a denial of Japaneseness to any other racial group (for example, the Japanese of Korean origin are not viewed as true Japanese). Yukio Mishima, as a case in point, can prove his sincerity, his devotion to the Emperor, to the purity of the ideals of the race by offering up his body on the altar of this nation-self pact. The nation is always characterized by this ambivalence, this violence, for it is not the realization of the promised enlightenment process but its failure, its restriction. Looked at positively, the nation space can be seen as a shelter (the Greater East Asia

Co-Prosperity Sphere?) for this greater enlightenment to occur. But too often this devolves into a national chauvinism as the nation extracts its own price. The virtual silence and appropriation of the religious philosophy into other forms and practices, while guaranteeing its continued influence, also undermines its revelatory powers. In this absence the nation as an all too present embodiment can be enforced.

While the cinema bears the marks of such a cosmological structuration, it still stands apart. It may be better regarded as a space for the contestation, or at least a playroom for these ideas. It moves within its own spheres, as so many formalist critics would contend, but cannot help but be intimately involved in this greater national discourse. And practice.

I have resisted trying to use the films as a mere distillation of my ideas, preferring to allow them some separate peace so they could partake of my own, perhaps misguided, sense of a carnivalesque discourse -- a meditation rather than a pseudo-scientific movement of hypothesis to thesis. But here, I will indulge in a more 'overdetermined' analysis since this is part of a speculative and comparative exploration of contemporary Japanese films with the past firmly in view. The three films I will examine are treated more briefly and less hermeneutically with the desire to interrogate the understanding outlined above.

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The beginning of the 'post postwar' may be explicitly marked by the death of Emperor Hirohito in late 1989,<sup>180</sup> but the nexus of social and political attitudes representative of this 'new'

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<sup>180</sup> Hirohito's death occasioned a number of books and articles, based on newly released documents, that questioned his role in the Pacific War; in particular the year leading up to Japan's unconditional surrender after the dropping of two nuclear bombs on Japan in August, 1945. How much Hirohito knew about the progress of the war, how deeply implicated was he in the fateful decision to pursue war with America and at what point did he realize that defeat was inevitable became hot topics in the country. The divide between the supporters of the Emperor who downplayed his

era in Japanese history were already well in place. Thus the films I have chosen circulate around this date. They were made at a time when the discourse about whether “Japan is a postmodern” country was much in evidence and, as noted earlier, a time of great economic prosperity (at least until the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s and the subsequent catatonia of the Japanese economy).

A surprising aspect of this time of unprecedented prosperity -- and Japan was now undoubtedly a first world nation, its GDP second only to America -- was the extent to which questions of national identity still remained prevalent. Despite a resurgent nationalism of the ‘Japan That Can Say No’ and, indeed, a sense of triumph after the ignominy of defeat and occupation, despair and self-doubt -- of how ‘to live’ in a world that threatened to dissolve a unique sense of self (both personally and collectively) -- continued to haunt the Japanese imagination.<sup>181</sup> The transliteration of postmodern ideas into a Japanese context brought some

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involvement and those who had been calling for at least some accountability (not the least of which was a wonderful cinema verité documentary by Kazu Hara entitled *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*) grew even wider. Because of the extent of the competing voices, it is near impossible to fully summarize how people felt about Hirohito, much more Japan's imperial history. Daikichi Irokawa, a historian at Tokyo University, suggested that the emperor system be abandoned and that “the emperor could become the master of traditional Japanese culture and make the historical role of the imperial line come to life.” (Daikichi Irokawa, trans. By Mikiso Hane and John Urda *The Age of Hirohito In Search of Modern Japan* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) p. 146). However, one Emperor-watcher (an austere *paparazzi*, as far as I can tell) who supports the retention of the emperor-system, while acknowledging that Hirohito only escaped trial as a war criminal because it was politically expedient for the Allies to keep him in place, argues that it still does not absolve him. He concludes that “when all is said and done, historians will have this to say about Emperor Hirohito: He may have been of pure and noble character, but for some reason he never found it in himself to accept responsibility for the war.” (Toshiaki Kawahara, *Hirohito and His Times*, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1990).p 209). This somewhat bland conclusion may be indicative of the type of compromise or consensus position that eventually resulted; a sense of exhaustion and a desire to simply move on.

<sup>181</sup> As an object lesson in the ambivalence about national identity and self-conscious efforts to change the nature of Japanese society it may be relevant to briefly consider the government program begun in the latter part of the 1980s. *Kokusaika* (Internationalization), a program of education and cultural exchange, imported ‘native English speakers’ to act as assistant teachers in Junior and Senior High Schools (with the occasional guest appearance in primary schools) throughout Japan. The idea was to expose Japanese students to the cultural mores and language of the West (under controlled conditions). A smaller subset of the program also included the introduction of French and German,

comfort as it represented a more refined, sophisticated re-working of the *nihonjinron* discourse; and was predicated upon a (proud) belief that Japan was indeed the world's first postmodern nation. Instead of the old dilemma of whether Japan was a modern nation (or to what extent modernity disturbed the intimate relationship between the state and the citizen), there was an interesting appropriation of Western ideas to argue that Japan represented a society where the past and the present were incorporated in a novel way; that did not erase one to promote the other. These arguments represented a viewpoint that understood change (and history) in a new light. Rather than lament the past as a way of preserving it (for example, is this the ultimate effect of Ozu's postwar cinematic offerings?) or, alternatively, critically deconstructing it so that the 'new Japan' could be created, one should celebrate the continuance of traditions within the present. In other words, accept the traditional within the modern for it is profoundly associated with a sense of the uniqueness of the self. There can be cohabitation, a mutually harmonious relationship of the new and the old, the inside and outside. But the decade long recession that

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but English speakers from the USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand were by far the predominant feature of this attempt to 'internationalize' the Japanese at a relatively young age. The flip side of the program was to disseminate Japanese culture and language through the creation of the Japan Foundation (a kind of cultural foreign office that supported the export of Japanese cultural products worldwide) and the return of the various Westerners who had taught in Japan to their native countries (as a former participant this work may in fact be a product of this program). This remains a serious attempt to remodel the social structures of the society by inverting the Meiji reformers strategy that sent envoys to the West to learn as much as they could. It is still too early to fully evaluate the lasting effect or merit of this program, but it does reveal that despite the over hundred years of contact with and inculcation of so many foreign influences, it was felt by those in power that the Japanese people still (somehow) remained stubbornly insular; and that this was detrimental to the future success of the nation. Thus the embrace of the internationalization program (though there were more than a few bitter opponents), quixotic as it sometimes seemed, represents a desire to strategically if not fundamentally alter the social landscape. Politically, it may be an attempt to counter what was seen as a potentially dangerous rebirth of nationalism in the 1980s. Others have noted that it is financed out of the foreign aid budget and thus was a way to spend some of the budget surplus on foreigners but in a manner beneficial to Japan. In any event, the program – which continues to the present – suggests that though there is a strong sense of national self, there is also a level of dissatisfaction with such insularity and that it may be a handicap in a world increasingly interpolated with the other; that this otherness needs to be inculcated into the body of the nation as a means of strengthening the dialectical process of adaptation and resistance.

followed the heady economic boom in the 1980s and which saw the 1990s as a time of indecision and doubt because of the failure to reform an economic structure marred by cronyism, corruption and political stasis,<sup>182</sup> may have undermined such smug postmodern assertions. Maybe this blasé acceptance of the status quo -- an important and mostly politically regressive element in the structural arrangement of Japanese society ignored by the early exponents of a postmodern Japan -- is not nearly so beneficial or constructive a position. In any event, one hears little about the genius of the system these days.

Beyond the historical and economic accommodations outlined above, this postmodern space also exhibits a greater degree of differentiation than was usual in the past. More precisely, as a result or coterminous with its economic successes and temporal movements, a restructuring of the social landscape is evident. Though I maintain that it is primarily a matter of 'penetration' by the other, it is important to understand that the phallic assertiveness of this space has been gendered and queered; and not, despite the resistance to any racial 'contamination,' devoid of some diasporic influence. Contemporary Japan is much more diverse, and more significantly, accepting of its diversity than in the 1950s. It is not without conflict, however. Heteronormative (and simple male chauvinist) strategies still restrict any radical understanding of self that would threaten the actual and discursive power arrangements; to what extent, however, is still an open question. The "internationalization" program that continues to attempt to 'expose' ordinary Japanese citizens to the other (re: Western cultures and language) may equally be portrayed as a

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<sup>182</sup> The Liberal Democratic Party that has led Japan since 1955 with only an interruption of less than two years continues to be the target of criticism and cynicism about the whole political process; yet the party continues to cling to power.

kind of cultural inoculation so that the virus of otherness can be combated; so that the body of the nation may be preserved. As well, there is a greater sense that contemporary Japanese society is much less assured by the wisdom of its prevailing social and political structures. This gap, between the old men who run the country and the populace, is not only the result of progressive and 'foreign' ideas and attitudes, but also a result of the alienation and meaninglessness engendered by the oppressive and bureaucratic fact of modern life; a scenario understood all too well by Mr. Watanabe in *Ikiru*.

Film and other popular culture forms (TV, pop music, comic books and novels, modern theatre, etc.) express this underlying sense of discontent and emancipatory promise, but, as usual, it is difficult to determine whether they represent a call to arms or a cathartic release from the pressures of (post) modernity. For what it's worth, my guess is the latter. The social space where one may see one self as other (a key element of any diasporic, gender and queer discourse, for better or for worse) is a liberating one in a globalized social and economic environment, but also disabling because the resulting fragmentation can do little against a powerful national discourse. If this seems too despairing an attitude, it is worth bearing in mind that a fundamental precept of Japanese subjectivity – as I have argued it – is precisely this metaphysically sanctioned sense of self, appropriated to mean the self as residing within the community (and nation) and not the individual. The postmodern tsunami – ideologically complicit with economic globalization -- appearing on the horizon is merely an extension of this already understood and practiced form in Japan: A wider inclusion of ideas and attitudes that do little to alter powerful hierarchies.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Eric Cazdyn makes a contrary argument: In his book-length study of Japanese cinema, he writes that Japan "exceeds itself. It bleeds into all that which is not Japan; into the workings and meanings of the world system; into our imaginations, whether we live there or not. The task of this work is to theorize a cultural history based on these



Or so it seems. Part of my fascination with Japanese postmodernity (or Japan as a postmodern nation) is how Western postmodern ideas wash up on these islands' rocky shores, their liberating impulses spent. For looking through a glass darkly (as I am), one sees a shackled postmodern space, but also a desire to be free. For if the postmodern condition is characterized by fragmentation, apparent decentered-ness, diffusion, the panoply of cultural hybrids, of cross-border cultural shopping, does not Japan suggest that such a process is prey to the basic vulgar facts of nation and established, repressive hierarchies? That the (national) social space will continue to absorb whatever new/different, expressions/realities are presented, that they are merely grist for a mill that will process then offer them up for sale as another shiny 'new' postmodern commodity? Thus this return to the discourse of nation, not to praise or bury it, but to recognize that its embedded-ness is more profound than the New World vision of some multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nation just beyond the horizon. Japan may represent postmodernity's *dark* promise: an embrace that is both comforting and stifling. For difference -- the emancipatory calling card of postmodernity -- can only be accepted if frisked and disarmed by the border patrol of nation.

This chapter is a reflection on how the sense of nation still retains its discursive power in contemporary Japanese society and cinema, but equally how it is contested. Does another time signify another place? 'Japan as a Postmodern Nation' may answer the question; however inconclusively.

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excesses -- to spotlight the spaces in which film and the nation fly away from their fixed borders, in which aesthetics and geopolitics meet -- in order better to explain historical change and transformation in modern Japan and beyond." Eric Cazdyn, *The Flash of Capital Film and Geopolitics in Japan* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 1. I will return to Cazdyn in my analysis of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Tetsuo*, but it is important to recognize

If postmodernism can claim, at the very least, to being possessed of more wit than its grim, modernist precursor, *Tampopo* (Jûzô Itami, 1986) would be a prime exhibit. Here the past and the present collide in a carnival of culinary delights. Its barely linked stories and flashbacks portray a more hip Japan than any previous film. In fact, it's the film's humor and savvy acceptance of what it mocks that reveals a new, albeit superficial 'postmodern' sensibility in Japanese society circa mid-1980s. It's a self-referential 'noodle western,' a comedy, a satire of gangster and samurai and 'mother' films from the 1950s and 1960s in Japan. Ultimately a satire of what it means to be Japanese, *Tampopo* is a companion piece to, or a bedfellow of, *Ikiru*, but so different that the notion of a 'national cinema' is called into question.<sup>184</sup>

*Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (Shinya Tsukamoto, 1989) on the other hand, is a strange and bloody cult masterpiece, shot in black and white with minimal dialogue. In it a man turns, gruesomely so, into a machine. Many of the themes of dehumanization, the triumph of technology, the loss of identity are prevalent here.

*Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1993), one of the best of the *anime* films currently dominant in the Japanese film industry, explores the question of memory and identity, of what it means to be human. *Anime* has become such a broad and diverse genre that one has to tread carefully. There are simply too many avenues to pursue in one film; however, it is important to acknowledge that it is the bread and butter of the film industry (along with a pervasive porn industry) at the present time. As a pop culture phenomenon, it is of course integrated into the

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his approach because he does not indulge my metaphysical speculations, preferring to emphasize the crucial role of transnational capitalism in any conceptualization of nation and cinema.

<sup>184</sup> Though Itami's work is mostly a light-hearted commentary on Japanese society, his tragic death, probably at the hands of some *yakuza* thugs, suggests that the combined dark forces of nationalism and brutality still lurk within the nation.

whole dominant apparatus of commercial technology. The films are part of a larger, increasingly simulated environment of user-friendly technological toys, virtual pets and fan-obsessed web sites; if they are (globally) exceptional, it is in the fact that they are the antithesis of the 'Disneyfication' of the world; though with the same commercial intent.

The Japan/not Japan terrain of both films further evokes a sense of loss, of a national identity crisis. It is bodily and at times messy. The endless morphing, mutating bloodlust suggest the undertow of anxiety and dread that permeate Japanese society. Without succumbing completely to a psychoanalytic interpretation, it is interesting to postulate that the spatial-temporal distortions of the films balance on an axis of a loss of nation and a bodily retrieval of nation-ness. The work of anthropologist Brian Moeran is useful in this context for he makes an argument that the excessive sex and violence of Japanese cinema reflects a desire to 'repair' this shattered national self-identity. It is a particularly religious idea based on the importance of 'selflessness' as related to individual desire and the harmony of the group:

This notion of selflessness demands that man –and it is 'man' rather than 'woman' – go beyond his thinking self and intuitively grasp a spiritual nothingness which is beyond dualities of good and bad, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness. In this respect, it can be said to be anti-language. Yet language does in many respects make us aware of time. In Japan – and doubtless in many other societies, too – the appreciation of beauty, the sexual climax and the attainment of selflessness when face to face with death, are all moments when language is driven from man's mind and time is conquered. It is only at such moments perhaps that the Japanese can overcome the irrevocable march of history, only then can they solve the inherent conflict between individual desires and group constraints. The conquering of time simultaneously becomes the conquering of the space between self and other.<sup>185</sup>

Moeran's analysis is antithetical to Ian Buruma whose fascinating book, *A Japanese*

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<sup>185</sup> Brian Moeran, *Language and Popular Culture in Japan* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 174-75.

*Mirror: Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture* (1984), sees the violence and eroticism of Japanese (pop) culture as providing a cathartic release from the strains of everyday life. Buruma, like Gregory Barrett in *Archetypes in Japanese Film* (1989), link the expressions of violence and desire to the persistence of traditions within the social and cultural history of the nation. Whichever side of the equation one supports, these analyses are necessary factors for an understanding of the social import of the films examined here. Taken as whole, these films explore a terrain still haunted by the past. Their temporal and spatial structures tease and pull apart traditional narrative practices, seeking a form of expression that would encapsulate the stresses and strains of an existential crisis in contemporary Japanese society. In the context of my exploration of Japanese cinema, they provide a stark contrast to the films from the 1950s; yet they also offer enough suggestive similarities to make a simple comparative analysis intricate and intriguing.

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Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, in her anthropological work *Rice as Self Japanese Identities Through Time*, stresses the importance of understanding how food is used as a means of representation, as “metaphors of self.” For her, the dominant metaphorical food in Japan is rice because it is deeply ingrained (!) in the history and geography and indeed economy of the nation.

What distinguishes rice from other candidates for symbols is its link to space and time, or more concretely, land and history.... In short, rice paddies created “Japanese land.” Rice paddies stand for “the ancestral” and, at the family level, seigniorial power was expressed through the image of golden heads of rice stretching across the lord’s territory.

This double linkage to the Japanese self – representing its *body* and its *land* – may be a clue to the enormous power and resilience of rice symbolism which has *remained more*

*meaningful and powerful than both the imperial system and agriculture itself.*<sup>186</sup> (original italics)

I will not attempt to contest Ohnuki-Tierney's conception of the dominance of rice as a symbol of the Japanese self, having lived next to rice paddy (in the middle of a town) in Japan and having eaten hundreds of bowls of plain white rice with a red pickle in the middle (and thus resembling the flag). But this aside, her argument that rice is intimately linked to the primordial (Japanese) self, to purity, land, history, to ethnicity, nationalism, is also evocative of the status of the simple bowl of ramen noodles. In both cases, there is the sense that we are what we eat not only because we eat *it*, but because *we* eat it. Rice or noodle, they are a locus for individual sustenance and communal sharing; as well as a means of marking our selves as a community of those who eat the rice/noodle.

The metonymic status of rice can be easily related to the antics of the characters in pursuit of the perfect bowl of ramen noodles in *Tampopo*. In one aspect, ramen noodles may be even more appropriate to postmodern Japan as a symbol because it is so pervasive and because it is *not* linked to the land, but to the postindustrial (non-agricultural, though farmers continue to be heavily subsidized as in Western Europe) economy as a pre-packaged grocery item and quick stop restaurant meal. The ramen noodle is not represented in the film so much as an organic link to a traditional economy or a basic human need, but fetishized as a product, as a source of pleasure and community. In other words, in an increasingly abstracted environment, this humble Japanese fast food's representational power is greater because it is so unnecessary (and not primordial) yet so indicative of how far and how close the Japanese are to their traditional roots.

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<sup>186</sup> Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self Japanese Identities Through Time* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 132.

Rice is the traditional continuing into the modern, the noodle, on the other hand, is postmodern (the modern containing the traditional). The noodle is what a 'Big Mac and Fries' is to America as opposed to what steak and potatoes may represent.

The linkage of food and society is revealing of Japanese society, as Graham Parkes notes, because its presentation and consumption are indicative of an aesthetic wholly different from Western cultures:

The first thing to notice about a Japanese meal is that how it *looks* is as important as how it tastes: the best Japanese cuisine is almost as much a feast for the eyes as it is a treat for the palate. Even in the most modest eating establishment, far from the metropolis, care is taken as a matter of course concerning the aesthetic appearance of the meal. And insofar as it provides satisfaction for the senses of sight and touch as well as taste, one usually eats less than usual before feeling satisfied. (The particular sense of satisfaction experienced after a good Japanese dinner is rarely accompanied by a feeling of overfulness – perhaps in part because savoring of the visual and tactile pleasures inclines one to eat more slowly.) Another thing to notice is that most of the meal is served at one time, rather than course by course as in the West. The advantage of this “nonlinear” way of eating is a remarkably wide range of tastes, as one gradually works one’s way through the various combinations of flavors afforded by a large number of small dishes laid out at the same time.<sup>187</sup>

This passage is oddly descriptive of the experience of viewing *Tampopo*. But before indulging in too much culinary theorizing, it is also worth noting the film’s director, Juzo Itami’s, wittily disingenuous and cautionary comment:

*Tampopo* was based on a Western – Howard Hawks’ *Rio Bravo*. Both had the same basic theme of several unlikely people helping the hero achieve a goal. The heart of the film was that of a classic Western, with the episodes about food added to the mix. The characters in the film had a strong desire for food and sex. *Tampopo* was an exception [from my other films] – a Western parody. It wasn’t really about Japan at all.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Graham Parkes, “Ways of Japanese Thinking,” in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, edited by Nancy G. Hulme (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1995), p. 80.

<sup>188</sup> Juzo Itami in an interview with Max Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Films* (Trumbull, CT.: Weatherhill Inc., 1999), p. 75.

Despite Itami's objections and despite the humorous use of traditional Western clothing, codes and conventions, *Tampopo* speaks more about the Japanese condition than any other film during the mid-1980s. For such is the extent of how apparently interpolated with the Other, the Occidental, Japan has become. Yet also, upon closer examination, how *typically* Japanese the country remained. The film is a parody, and a paradox. This is its strength: it parodies the Western, yes, but more pointedly, it uses the cowboy picture to poke the paradoxical codes and conventions of Japanese cinema and society.

Before the opening credits – so many Japanese films contain extended sequences as a prelude to the title sequence that one is tempted to make extravagant claims of 'excess' and 'spillage' – a gangster and his moll walk into a movie theatre. His henchmen bring in a sumptuous full course meal (replete with wine) that they set in front of him. He speaks directly to the audience (us), acknowledging our 'presence' ("So you are seeing a movie too? What are you eating?"). He threatens another moviegoer for eating too loudly. The lights fade to black. The titles begin. Against a truck windshield, wet with rain, car lights flash in the darkness. Titles. Cut to daytime and overhead shots of a city. A voice over says: "I went with an old man to have noodles..." The camera cuts to an old man explaining the correct aesthetic attitude to adopt when eating a bowl of steaming ramen noodles: How to dip the pork into the broth; How to observe the

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Itami, who committed suicide in early 1998 (or was pushed out a window by *yakuza* thugs, was the son of left-wing director Mansaku Itami. Juzo Itami had been a welterweight boxer, a band organizer, a commercial designer, a magazine editor, a translator (of William Saroyan and Peter Shaffer), a reporter, a talk show host, an actor (appearing in Kon Ichikawa's adaptation of Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters*) and an author.

*Tampopo* made over \$3 million in the U.S., but, says Itami in this interview, was a box office failure in Japan. His other films, notably his first feature, *The Funeral*, *A Taxing Woman* and *A Taxing Woman Returns* were popular in Japan. His feature -- *Mimbo*, an educational comedy on how to resist the strong-arm tactics of the *yakuza* -- led to a vicious assault by a gang of criminals. He survived this but died a few years later under mysterious circumstances.

bowl, how to turn it (as in the tea ceremony); What to eat first. But this is just a story. It is being read by Gun to the truck driver Goro as they motor through the night. It makes them hungry and so they stop at the Lai Lai Restaurant for a bowl of ramen noodles. Thus right at the beginning of the film, we are presented with two introductory sequences that revolve around food, and acts of spectatorship and reading. The first introduces the gangster couple -- who will slip in and out of the film -- and the Gun and Goro, who play important roles in the principal storyline. These two sets of characters will never meet or even barely acknowledge each other. It is, however, this divided, playful and self-conscious narrative style that will characterize *Tampopo*.

The main storyline in *Tampopo* revolves around the efforts of Goro and a loosely assembled gang of men to remake Tampopo's -- the heroine -- restaurant. Not only do they seek to create a perfect bowl of ramen soup, but in the process, completely redesign the shop itself. The numerous stories that interrupt, or flavour the basic story are like the onions, radishes and meats that are added to the simple ramen soup.

Without following a close narrative analysis of the entire film, it is instructive to consider an early segment. When Goro (dressed in a black cowboy hat, a red bandana around his neck, a vest over his shirt, looking for all the world like an Oriental Jack Palance) and his partner Gun (!) step out of their truck (it's hood ornament the horns of a steer) into the Lai Lai noodle shop, the other customers glare in a cowboy movie parody of the entrance of the hero into the saloon. They order their bowls, noting to themselves that it is not being prepared to the standards they desire, while a drunk Piskin (an old friend of Tampopo's) proposes to marry her and take her away from this dead-end restaurant. He is loud and obnoxious and Goro tells him to be quiet because they are trying to eat. The result is that Goro tells Gun to drive the truck to make their delivery time



while he stays to fight Piskin and his entire gang. They fight in the parking lot (unseen, the camera stays with Tampopo and her son Tabo as they watch). Fade to black. The next morning, Goro, bruised but with a casual dignity, is nursed by Tampopo and her admiring son. Gun arrives with the truck and they all eat breakfast. In the course of the conversation, it slips out that Goro and Gun are not particularly impressed with Tampopo's ramen soup. They give her some pointers. As they are driving away, Tampopo begs them to help her improve her soup. They agree. A wipe takes us to Tampopo exercising by lifting the heavy cauldron in which the noodles are boiled. Another wipe takes us to her running while Goro times her with his stopwatch. The stirring music (as if they are on the high plains of the typical Cowboy movie) and sound effects (the ticking stopwatch) as well as a brief, almost imperceptible speeded-up motion underline the self-conscious, parodic nature of the film. But at this point it literally moves away from the Western to an even greater playfulness. As Tampopo jogs on the spot, the camera abandons her to follow a group of salarymen as they walk towards a high-rise hotel for lunch. Inside the restaurant, the elder men follow the lead of their most senior member in ordering the same dish. However, the youngest (a bumbling junior member of the staff we can safely assume) shocks everyone by exhibiting a precise knowledge and superior taste in his order. In so doing, he breaks the pattern of conformity. The camera, however, does not stay with them (and they never reappear in the film), but follows the waiter as he presumably goes to fill their order. The camera then tracks and pans with this waiter, but abandons him to follow another waiter as he goes to take the order of a *gaijin* (an outsider, in this case a heavy set white customer). He seems to point to the bar. The camera pans on his action revealing a ladies group that is being instructed on how to 'correctly' eat spaghetti like a westerner. A cut takes us to their table where they are

encouraged by their instructor to slurp their pasta as silently as possible. However, they are rudely interrupted by the loud sounds of the obviously Western patron slurping his noodles with Oriental abandon. The class soon breaks down and they all begin to loudly slurp their meal. Once the joke is played out, the camera once again pans to pick up another waiter who is delivering food upstairs in the hotel. He wheels a sumptuous repast into the room of the *yakuza* couple we met at the beginning of the film. The waiter leaves and the couple begin (or continue) their lovemaking, this time with the just delivered food. A circular fade ends this sequence and we are once more following Goro and Tampopo as they make the rounds of various ramen establishments to observe how others make and serve their soup. A series of wipes move us through these, sometimes, one-shot scenes.

This is the basic narrative pattern of the film. As the principal narrative progresses, a series of diversions take us to scenes that are thematically linked to the story, but do not have any direct bearing on the central plot. Some are longer and more elaborate, others brief asides. They are usually satirical, playing on a number of themes and scenarios from Japanese cinema and society. The result is that we receive a humorous pastiche: A man has an abscess in his mouth which is punctured by a dentist, the smell makes the dentist and his assistants retch in disgust, but also sexually arouses one of the female dental assistants. An old woman runs through a supermarket fingering various foods while a disconcerted shopkeeper chases after her. He closes his shop and goes for a meal where the camera leaves him for another table where two men are in the middle of a meal while they attempt to con each other. A policeman arrives to arrest one of the men, but the camera instead follows a man who is running desperately down the street. He takes a subway train and we follow him home where his dying wife – in a wicked parody of the

self-sacrificing mother in the very popular ‘Mother films’ of the 1950s – rises from her deathbed, white as ghost, to make one last omelet for her husband and throng of children before collapsing dead on the floor. The father encourages the children to keep eating. And so it goes, one vignette piled on another, with the only recurring characters being the *yakuza* couple who are usually making love (with food) or reminiscing about great meals (one sequence with them includes a flashback as the gangster recounts his first taste of an oyster fresh from the sea). For the most part, these stories are linked to each other by a simple camera pan that picks up the trail of a character in the frame or by a wipe. They are generally concluded with a fade (sometimes a trick fade such as circle) that returns us to the on-going attempts of Tampopo and her ‘teachers’ to find the perfect recipe for culinary success.

The overall effect of this narrative style is that the film transgresses the typical divide that separates the principal narrative from the background action: It foregrounds what is usually an aspect of the *mise en scène*. As such, there is a spatial linkaging of the stories as the narrative spins off to follow the actions of these peripheral characters. In fact, the camera is downright hyperactive, constantly pursuing paths in a manner akin to a stream of consciousness novel. All these ‘sub-stories’ are about food and sex, however, and as such are thematically linked to the central plot. Also, they function like the famous ‘pillow shot’ in an Ozu film in that they are unrelated to the main plot and thus spatially and temporally disorienting, but also act as a temporal bridge for when we do return to the main storyline, it has advanced chronologically. However it too has an episodic structure. As the characters advance toward their goal, they have their own vignette-like adventures (spying on other ramen restaurants, rescuing an old man from

choking to death on a food he can hardly swallow but loves, visiting a group of hobos who are gathered around an old master chef, and so forth).

Liberated from traditional narrative structures, *Tampopo* builds a superficial but wide-ranging portrait of Japanese society. The sum of its parts is a world characterized by obsession and frivolity. The numerous characters share one common aspect: their love of food. It is not solely a question of hunger, but a focus on the bodily and psychological need for food (underlined in the film's final image, a woman breast feeding her baby). Thus despite their separation from each other in terms of narrative coherency, the lives of the disparate characters in *Tampopo* are united in their quest to satisfy this most elemental of needs; though perhaps not for elemental reasons. The tangential vignettes and the episodic main plot both explore various facets of Japanese society. There is no racial or regional or class division; indeed, the most knowledgeable culinary connoisseurs are the outcasts camped in a park who retrieve their most precious wines and steaks from the refuse of five-star hotels and restaurants around Tokyo. Hence even the traditional outsiders in Japanese society – anyone who is not a pure blood Japanese – are shown as necessary to create the best ramen soup; notably, it is from a Chinaman that Tampopo steals the recipe for making the best-tasting soup. The posse that gathers round Tampopo – a truck driver, a hobo, a millionaire and his chauffeur, a construction worker – are drawn from many walks of life, thus adding to the sense of diversity in the society as a whole. The fact that they overcome their differences – the only disagreement is between Piskin and Goro, but this is resolved in a fair-minded one on one fist fight -- to work together may have more to do with cultural notions of cooperative action than a Howard Hawks Western. The Japan that we observe here is competitive (Tampopo continually asserts that she wants “to win,” not

only to beat her competitors – who in turn jealously guard their secret recipes – but to the best she can be) but also incongruously harmonious. Such a positive portrait of Japanese society is undercut by the fact that, in many ways, *Tampopo* (this serious Japanese comedy/Cowboy picture) remains self-consciously removed from the lives of its characters. Its self-reflexivity gently mocks and celebrates their obsessions; but equally, the film mocks itself.

Frankly, it is this self-mocking tone that is most interesting to me. The film's self-awareness reveals an ironic and witty sensibility largely lacking in the previous films. Combined with its elliptical narrative structure, the effect is liberating. The pursuit of the perfect bowl of ramen is very much like the quest for a Japanese essence, the principal drive that fuels much of the *nihonjinron* discourse, as well as a parable of the remaking of Japan after the war. That the film is as much about itself furthers emphasizes the importance of cinema in this search and rescue operation. Its 'message' in this regard is clear in two complementary ways. As a film, *Tampopo* is a Western (that most Western of Western genres!), but also a parody of Japanese gangster, 'mother' and the lower-class comedies and dramas of the *shomin-geki* genre. Thus it suggests that there is no purely Japanese film; rather, its heterogeneity is such that any easy classification, any essence is perhaps not possible. It is, instead, a melange of styles, of competing influences from both within and outside the country.

The soup created by the ramen posse is part Chinese, a collaborative effort that blends the talents of the various 'gang' members. And once the perfect bowl has been created – a bowl/space profuse in its ingredients, fussed over by a number of chefs and aesthetically celebrated with a particular Japanese ceremonial reverence -- the makeover extends to Tampopo and her little shop. The result, ironically, is an upscale joint, reminiscent of the strange, culturally

neutral coffeehouses that continue to dot the Japanese landscape. Tampopo, in her newly attired chef's hat and uniform, looks – as Goro says – like a movie star. And as Goro stands at the door preparing to take his leave, he is John Wayne at the end of *The Searchers*.

The self-reflexive structural interplay of *Tampopo's* spatial and temporal planes has led Charles Shirô Inouye to mark the film as a turning point in Japanese cinematic history. His dense, perhaps overloaded analysis of the film positions it at the apex of a postmodern Japan: an affluent Japan, self-aware, accepting of its heterogeneity (and its protean nature) and cognizant of its own construction. Before quoting extensively from Inouye's essay on the film, it should be noted that for him, a postmodern vision comes only after there is an awareness of the materiality and artificiality of art; and that this can be seen in the case of *Tampopo* because the audience shares – and is invited to share -- in its humorous self-consciousness. But also, and this is central to his analysis, it represents a moment when the spatial understanding (grapheme, in his terminology) begins to undermine the phonocentric (temporal) nature of narrative cinema:

Precisely because of its ability to frame the viewer and to disrupt the otherwise seamless flow of cinematic illusion, *Tampopo* effectively narrated both the semiotic and thematic complexities of Japan in the 1980s. This was a time when the grapheme began to reassert its position by way of this form of narrative that began with its suppression, and it was also the time for Japan to emerge victoriously as a participant in a "universal" capitalist narrative of postwar recovery and economic growth. In other words, by 1980, the *raison d'être* of the motion picture had moved from motion to the picture; just as a transition occurred from a discourse of catching up with the West to one of the so called theories of Japaneseness (*Nihonjinron*) and their obsession with cultural essences. At the same time, the sophistication of Japan's cinematic production led us to a situation where the motion picture could begin to point to its own constructed, not necessarily linear, nature....

By slowing the speed of this construction of reality, or by disrupting continuity with less gradual (and therefore less plausible) transitions or connections, we have become aware of the motion picture's constituent frames and of the constructed nature of the narrative that is actually comprised of nothing more than an exhaustive listing of pictures. With this process of bringing space back into the motion picture, that is, making pictures less plausibly tied to time, we even become aware of the space of viewing: the show house

and its specialized function of making the private individual part of the public community. The show house is a central metaphor for the nature of modernity itself, for it bestows a sense of self while placing that self within a much larger atomizing system. It hides both the viewer and the mechanics of the motion picture in a totalizing darkness. At the moment when we become aware of this darkened space, as is inevitable when watching a motion picture such as Itami's *Tampopo*, we are no longer alone in the darkness, but are aware of ourselves and of others, who might be seeing the same things differently, rather than seeing different things in the same way.<sup>189</sup>

Whether *Tampopo* is such a seminal work may still be an open question, but the self-reflexive structure does undermine its narrative and temporal progress enough to bring us back to our spectatorial position and the film's own spectacular presence. In this spatial foreground, notions of Japanese indigenous traditions or Western borrowing are subsumed, transformed into a postmodern spectacle of protean ingredients. And like so much in Japan, it is not merely a process of charting the individual influences, but paying attention to how they are integrated into the society, how the spatial has (once again) consumed the temporal. The failure of the film at the box-office in Japan, but success in the overseas market, suggests that its satirical cheeriness did not strike the right chord with Japanese audiences; but definitely appealed to foreign viewers by showing a Japan that was not such a monologic, economic juggernaut. Indeed, a key joke in *Tampopo* is its lampooning of Japanese acquisitorial instincts (remember the 1980s shopping spree: multi-million dollar purchases of Van Goghs, American corporate assets, Gucci knick knacks), the society's compulsion to fetishize products *and* forms now that nearly everyone could afford to be a connoisseur (of fine wines, scotch and all the wondrous array of status-giving imports a newly arrived Japan could ever desire). Ironically, though the film inveigles

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<sup>189</sup> Charles Shirô Inouye, "In The Show House of Modernity: Exhaustive Listing in Itami Jûzô's *Tampopo*," in *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*, eds. Dennis Washburn and Carole Cavanaugh (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp 142-144.

against this avariciousness by turning it to the simple noodle, its casual and humorous valuation of difference was, for a foreign audience, disarming, humanizing (like a well-designed Toyota). *Tampopo's* quirkiness, the absolutely gorgeous *yakuza* couple sexually frolicking with their dinner, the seriously quaint efforts of the band of ramen warriors to liberate Tampopo from the drudgery of her *Lai Lai* noodle shop (so that she could put her name on a thriving, *redecorated* noodle shop), seems a California Roll version of Japanese cuisine/society. In fact, if these two ideas can be intertwined, the religious fervor of reconstruction – the pursuit of the holy grail/perfect bowl of noodles -- has resulted in a society nicely aligned with Western affluence (thus a market for imports) while still offering a faintly spiced exotica for sale. Safe. Adapted to Western tastes, the food is a little kinky but edible (like the spate of other edible movies: *The Wedding Banquet*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Like Water for Chocolate* and others that followed in its wake), another Made in Japan product that has obviously done its market research. This is one vision of post postwar Japan: Casually accepting of its heterogeneous nature; able to abide the changes that signal a reframing of old and new; safely repackaged for export (and open to imports) thus contained within the globalized community of capitalist exchange. It may be the Japan we want (to buy), because when all is said and done, it's still just a bowl of ramen, hold the radish.

Against *Tampopo's* celebratory tone of a quirky heterogenous Japan is *Tetsuo The Iron Man*. This underground classic shows us a Japan of alienation, of technological hubris, of bodily decay and transformation. The narrative is barely comprehensible, instead operating as a visual and aural assault on the senses. Whereas *Tampopo* offers a link between food and sex and the satirical portrayal of the body politic to sense of national self, *Tetsuo* forces on the viewer the



visual degradation of the body as a form of technological dehumanisation, an alienating and violent process of splitting and destruction. Instead of a comedic dream of the harmonious group, one is struck here by the nightmare of individual and social decay.

Narratively, *Tetsuo* can only be reconstructed in retrospect; and even then it remains elusive. A man (played by Tsukamoto himself) enters an abandoned factory where he inserts a steel rod into his leg. Images of smoke, dripping water, cables, torn posters of athletes on the wall, old machinery, tubes, piping, spare parts and a TV screen that alternately show a distorted image of a face laughing and screaming are combined with a pulsating techno score and the sounds of machines scraping and clanking. The high contrast black and white cinematography adds to the sense of disorientation and horror as he rips open his skin to shove the grilled pipe into his thigh; only to discover that maggots have infested the open wound. Running from the factory in horror, he appears to have been hit by a passing car (apparently a 1960s American model). These images are part of the opening credit sequence. After the accident, a montage of smoke, metallic objects, motors, are intercut with the titles and a well-dressed salaryman dancing in a kind of frenzy. It is part music video, part avant-garde dance/performance art. Such is the kinetic, aggressive force of the opening images/sound of the film. It does not ease up, however. This stylized tour de force continues throughout *Tetsuo* (just over an hour long), representing the unbridled triumph of the grapheme, to use Innouye's term, over the linear narrativity of the phoneme.

Briefly, it is the salaryman, the Tetsuo in the title, whom we see dancing. The film then follows him through dreams, flashbacks and fantasy sequences as he transforms into the Iron Man. At one point, he is pursued by a woman who herself is mutating into a machine. She tries

to kill him but he manages to fight her off. In his apartment, Tetsuo's girlfriend is alternately aroused and horrified by his transformation. She too, at one stage, seems to be turning into a machine (there is a brilliant sequence where she dances like the robotic Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and then sodomizes the naked and cowering Tetsuo with a phallic like hose that protrudes from her body), but this may simply be a nightmare experienced by Tetsuo. The graphic portrayal of Tetsuo's bloody metamorphosis is an expressionist spectacle underlined by the close ups and the actor's (Taguchi Tomoroh) expressive face. It culminates in his penis transforming into an industrial sized-drill that, as he is excited, whirrs and bores through the coffee table at which he is sitting. This is what later penetrates and kills his girlfriend who has been aroused by this new, Iron Tetsuo.

The whole sequence in Tetsuo's apartment – which comprises over a third of the film – is intercut with TV images of the 'other' Iron Man and flashbacks to Tetsuo and his girlfriend making love against a tree; a mysterious older man who questions what he is seeing (as does the audience, undoubtedly); and brief snatches of dialogue suggesting that Tetsuo and his lover were responsible for hitting the running man at the film's opening and are now being punished for their actions in covering up the accident. Yet these are just teasers, bits of dialogue and references that offer up the possibility of narrative coherency to the overflow of violent, disturbing imagery and grating, metallic sounds that characterize the film. One aspect of this narrative that does seem sure, however, is that Tetsuo is being taunted by someone, another Iron Man, whom we glimpse on the TV screen in Tetsuo's room. Thus when Tetsuo's transformation is complete, he races out into a landscape almost devoid of humanity, but full of wires, boarded up buildings, fences, smoke stacks, factories, a deserted industrial zone. Here he does final battle

with this other metalicized being (who, in a use of stop-motion photography, attempts to 'rust' Tetsuo's metallic parts). The outcome of this battle is that the two beings are joined into a massive lump of iron parts, their faces now buried within the body of this new metallic beast. Their voices, still separate, announce that they/it will turn "the whole world into metal," that they "can rust the whole world and scatter it like dust into the universe." Hence the stop-motion final images show the Iron Man moving into the 'New World,' the city that presumably awaits their conquest. Cut to black. And instead of 'The End' a flashing sign reading 'Game Over.'

*Tetsuo's* low budget is part of its aesthetic. The rough, indeed grungy, garage feel of the film works to its advantage by imparting an underground, found-film like quality to the proceedings. Watching it for the first time was like stumbling upon something illicit, too violent for a mainstream movie house; something repressed, nightmarish, unpalatable. One watches with shock and awe. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Night of the Living Dead* and the films of Dario Argente come to mind. The early work of Canada's own David Cronenberg (*Shivers*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*, *Videodrome*) is similarly evoked, particularly because of the film's focus on the mutability of the flesh, the grotesque transformation of the body; a body penetrated and torn apart by a demented technological urge, part eros, part thanatos. However, the visual rush of the film – its primary special effect is stop-motion photography – correlates equally with music videos and video arcade games as is acknowledged at its conclusion.

*Tetsuo* spawned its own sequel, *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1993) and there was talk of making a third to be titled *Tetsuo in America*.<sup>190</sup> The links to American science fiction/horror

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<sup>190</sup> These plans never came to fruition, but Tsukamoto's comments in an interview give some idea of how he perceived his films: "I want to make *Tetsuo in America* with a very detailed, American movie feel. I mean that if *Tetsuo* was a kind of distortion of horror films, then *Tetsuo in America* will be a distortion of *Blade Runner* or the

cinema can easily be made, however the breakdown of narrative coherency and chronological time structures are so complete that *Tetsuo* must also be understood as exceeding its American and internationalized roots. Japan's own *Kaiju* (Monster films stretching back to *Godzilla*) genre remains a touchstone for Tsukamoto's work, as does the experimental theatre and avant-garde art in the 1980s. As one critic wrote, *Tetsuo's* antecedents are numerous and varied:

Revolving around the transformation of people into grotesque hybrids of flesh and metal, *Tetsuo* is above all an overwhelming audiovisual experience, set to a brain-pounding score by Chu Ishikawa and complemented by suitably exaggerated sound effects. David Lynch's *Eraserhead* has often been mentioned as an influence because of its similar brooding, black and white images, but the film's visual language most likely originated elsewhere. The film's triumphant use of camerawork and editing are clear continuations of the style pioneered by Sogo Ishii, taking both to an even higher level of intensity than that on display in Ishii's seminal *Crazy Thunder Road* (Kuruizaki Sandaa Rodo, 1980) and *Burst City* (Bakuretsu Toshi, 1982), while the use of stop-motion recalls the scrap animations of Jan Svankmayer. Composition and lighting, especially the expressionistic close-ups, echo classic Japanese horror films such as *Throne of Blood* (Kumonosu-jo, 1957 - Akira Kurosawa), *Kwaidan* (Kaidan, 1964 - Masaki Kobayashi) and *Onibaba* (1965 - Kaneto Shindo). At the center of it all, actors move as if they were performers in a modern dance piece, belying the participants' origins in experimental theatre. The influences don't stop there. The design of the iron man combines elements from the work of artist H.R. Giger, the aforementioned Jan Svankmayer as well as Japan's own kaiju [monster] films.<sup>191</sup>

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*Alien* series. However, I think *The Matrix* dealt with the same subjects as *Tetsuo*, so I have to give it some more thought. It will be a Japanese film, but I would like to shoot it independently in the United States. After *Tetsuo in America* I think I would like to get closer to nature, and after that maybe I will return again to the subject of the modern metropolis."

<sup>191</sup> [www.midnighteye.com](http://www.midnighteye.com) The author, Ron Mes, interestingly, associates the film's thematic focus on transformation as being linked to the rejuvenation of Japanese cinema itself which, he claims, was in the doldrums:

With the exception of the studio projects *Hiruko the Goblin* (Hiruko - Yokai Hantaa, 1991) and *Gemini* (Soseiji, 1999), all the director's works present male-female relationships as the basis for transformation. Additionally, the relationships themselves evolve with each consecutive film. From the co-habitation of *Tetsuo*, to the happy young family with child of *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1993), through *Tokyo Fist's* stifled marriage torn apart by jealousy (1995), culminating in the final destruction of the family unit through suicide right at the start of *Bullet Ballet* (1998). The question of whether there will ever be a *Tetsuo III* has, thematically at least, already been answered, with a part IV thrown in to complete the cycle. Though not that influential in its country of origin (Tsukamoto was only one of many directors to follow Sogo Ishii's footsteps and move from underground to commercial filmmaking), *Tetsuo* did remind the

The most obvious and direct filmic link however, remains the well-known *anime Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988). This film's pivotal character, a weakling who metamorphosizes into a psychic mutant, a monstrous being wrecking havoc on 'neo-Tokyo' before transforming into an even more mysterious white light is named Tetsuo. Susan Napier, quoting Peter Boss, calls Tetsuo's transformation (in *Akira*) an "intimate apocalypse." Her work charts the diverse landscape of contemporary Japanese animation, of which *Tetsuo* is a live-action version. It is a filmic landscape that invites a psychoanalytic analysis:

*Akira* can be looked at on two levels: as a fresh expression of an alienated youth's search for identity and as a cyberpunk meditation on apocalypse. For now, the focus will be on a more personal form of destruction (and perhaps resurrection), what film scholar Peter Boss calls an "intimate apocalypse," the "sense of disaster being visited at the level of the body itself." This, in turn, is related to psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, in terms of separation from/identification with the maternal, as Tetsuo's disaster ridden body crosses gender boundaries to implode into a grotesque scene of birth.<sup>192</sup>

Such an understanding is directly applicable to *Tetsuo*,<sup>193</sup> as is Kelly Hurley's explication of a horror film subgenre, 'Body Horror,' to the psychological terrain inhabited by the film:

"Body Horror" [is] a hybrid genre that recombines the narrative and cinematic conventions of the science fiction, horror, and suspense film in order to stage a spectacle of the human body defamiliarized, rendered other. Body horror seeks to inspire revulsion – and in its own way pleasure -- through representations of quasi-human figures whose

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world that there was such a thing as Japanese cinema and that the films it created were still very unique indeed.

<sup>192</sup> Susan J. Napier, *Anime From Akira to Princess Mononoke* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>193</sup> Napier herself makes this connection: "Tetsuo's unhappy antiheroism represents a form of all-out adolescent resistance to an increasingly meaningless world in which oppressive authority figures administer the rules simply to continue in power. This bleak characterization clearly struck a chord in its Japanese audience. In fact, the brooding figure of Tetsuo became the inspiration behind filmmaker Tsukamoto Shinya's two avant-garde science fiction films, *Tetsuo I* and *Tetsuo II*, both of which were essentially homages to a particularly dark form of body metamorphosis." (*Ibid.*, p. 42.)

effect/affect is produced by their abjection, their ambiguation, their impossible embodiment of multiple, incompatible forms.<sup>194</sup>

Application of a psychoanalytic system, in this case, certainly helps to structure a response to this difficult film. The fantastical qualities suggest systems of dominance and power, that Tetsuo is being literally transformed into something inhuman by technological forces beyond his comprehension or control. Unlike *Akira*, this transformation is not given an explicit social context. But, of course, this absence is itself worth investigation. The film's landscape is one almost devoid of any comforting human presence. The stop-action imagery propels the characters through a post-industrial cityscape as if they are machines whizzing through back alleys of abandoned workshops, unused streets, concrete parking lots. It is a gritty high-speed rush where the increasingly dehumanized Tetsuo moves through an already dehumanized world. The camera's stark portrayal of the city via a high velocity Mizoguchi-like tracking shot offers no respite from these empty (non-human) spaces, other than, ironically, the fleshy distortions, the mutations of the characters' bodies. Its minimalistic narrative offers no sympathetic bonding with hero or heroine, no clue as to motivations or characterization. They are merely objects of this pure spectacle, figures of the *mise en scène*, open to interpretation as they are to the transformation they endure.

Spatial relations in particular are collapsed. What we see may be determined by the hallucinatory mind of Tetsuo or the random nature of a mechanized camera/observer. There is little coherency between locations, which the confusions of narrative do little to abate. Instead, we move breathlessly from TV images to Tetsuo's apartment to an older man who questions the

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*Cf. Ibid.*, p. 43.

proceedings to a subway (where Tetsuo is pursued by the mechanized woman) to the factory to these abandoned streets. Viewers are only given some semblance of temporal progression in the transmutation of Tetsuo's body. But the spatial domain outside of the body remains elusive: illusory, protean or metaphoric.

In this regard, one could argue that with the destruction of spatial coherency what we are left to watch is the temporalization of the body. If, as I have been arguing, the social meaning of space in a Japanese context entails the absorption of historical change as a way of protecting the body of the nation, *Tetsuo's* radical assault on the body – here denuded of any comforting social context -- has wider ideological implications. The stripped down world of *Tetsuo* posits a battleground where the technologization of Japanese culture, its postwar modernity, the shock of the new is experienced at this intimate and apocalyptic level (as Napier suggests). Unlike the other films, it is the triumph of time over space. And in the chaos of battle, there are only the elemental facts of violence and sexuality; or, perhaps more succinctly, sexualized violence.<sup>195</sup>

*Tetsuo's* dark vision, the sense of doom and desperation experienced by the characters as they constantly move in a world without meaning, suggests the exhaustion of the postwar social construct. Has the technological and capitalist rebirth after the war so denigrated collective and nationalist ideals, the sense of community, of sharing, of equitable justice? Have the structures of the 'New Japan' lost their *raison d'être*? Has the pace of change that bred citizens attuned to the demands of liberal capitalism -- but denied any actual say in the fundamental structures of governance -- resulted in a paralysing nihilism? Or, to turn the question around, that the

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Asked whether sex and violence are crucial to his work, Tsukamoto replied: "They're closely related, both originating from our animal instinct. They are as basic as the need to eat. I think they are fundamental elements for

cosmological embrace (entangled as it is in nationalistic notions) become too stifling of individual expression, vapid and empty, absurd?

People no longer want to eat the same old noodles. There is no warm and cozy communal space to ameliorate the repressive and indeed fascistic elements of the society. We are – I am – alone. All is merely servitude to the system, a system lacking any goals other than its own self-preservation/self-perpetuation. The ugly transfiguration of the body is a metaphoric enactment of the sacrifice of self (as body) to the avaricious and neverending demands of the state. The space no longer has cosmological or ideological authority. We are watching the temporalization of Tetsuo's body – the stop-motion accretion of metal until he becomes inhuman, a beast seeking only power, conquest, as he slouches towards Tokyo to be born. Is this Iron Man the state, or what we must become to survive in a brutal, chaotic and meaningless world?

*Tetsuo's* very minimalism opens up the possibility of such a reading without necessarily determining it. The post-apocalyptic landscape is still industrial. It is an historical environment, existing in the backwoods of the sleek postmodern terrain that also (primarily?) comprises contemporary Japan. The alienated, sexually violent world of the film is blackly humorous: a (deadpan) take on modernity's soulessness. In a sense, the film resists any social characterization. There is, instead, a nihilistic quality that denies any comfortable reading; that such sociological extrapolation is only a kind of contextualization that the film's horrific imagery, grating soundtrack and convulsive movement in fact questions. I note this feeling because my particular reading of the film emphasizes its radical nature as being linked to a fundamental inversion of the spatio-temporal dialectic (as I have portrayed it) in postwar Japan.

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cinema too, but I think a lot of films forget that instinctive aspect or whitewash it. That's why I want it to play a



*Tetsuo*, for me, is a vision of Japan where the fear of dissolution, of anarchy and death by temporal forces is acknowledged; graphically portrayed, without any attempt to contain, to repress or subvert its violent and aggressive character. In this regard, the film is unrepentant. A hysterical crying for what is lost – comfortable and understood human relations, the warm fit of culture felt by a people long integrated with each other on an island far away from the world's concerns.

Such a conception of the film is contrary to Moeran's idea -- quoted earlier -- that the sex and violence in Japanese cinema is a way of conquering time and the space between self and others, a means of affirming Japaneseness. As a 'distant' (or intrigued) observer, I cannot decide for to watch *Tetsuo* is to experience the breakdown of a sense of humanity (albeit Japanese style): The physiological effect of mechanization, of modernity, of a historical moment fraught with doubt, horror, death. Nationality, repressive and inhumane as it may often be, is still a historical pact between people and land, but this loss of boundaries takes us to a borderless domain, a Babylon where we sit and weep for a Zion past; a loss of our elemental humanity that is more profound than we normally allow ourselves to imagine. It is not merely the imagination of disaster, but of complete annihilation. This is the affective impact of the film.

It is a metaphoric portrait – in black – of the postwar era. The film, because of its old fashioned industrial sweatshops, is strangely historical. Though I have been referring to 'The Salaryman' as *Tetsuo*, he, in fact, may not bear this name until his final transformation into the Iron Man. In the stop-motion temporal accretion of mechanical parts, we are watching the history of the postwar era. The dehumanisation of this metonymic Japanese everyman, this Mr.

Watanabe, stands in for a greater sociological process: the mutational progress of the society. The figure of 'Tetsuo The Iron Man' could be read as Japan itself, a lumbering behemoth going forth to conquer the world.

This is no longer how it works, however. Technology's growth, its pervasive spread through the systems and bodies of humanity is a much more subtle process; more piecemeal, invisible and interrelational. It has shinier surfaces, a happier smile than this hoary *Nosferatu*, this modernist text.

For a brighter vision of technology's impact on Japanese society, one that explores issues of change and identity, it is useful to briefly turn to *Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995). This *anime* sci-fi classic, child of *Blade Runner*, godchild of *Total Recall* and *Robocop* and father to *The Matrix*, is well served by Susan Napier's chapter entitled "Doll Parts: Technology and the Body in *Ghost in the Shell*;" thus I am less inclined to embark on a detailed description of the film. As a comparative companion to *Tetsuo*, however, and to questions of nation it is worth exploring aspects of this remarkable film.

*Anime* is a fully developed pop culture form in Japan,<sup>196</sup> encompassing the nation's own long-held visual traditions (Edo-period illustrated books, woodblock prints and the more recent

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<sup>196</sup> *Anime* comprise at least fifty percent of TV shows, theatrical releases and OVAs – 'original video animation' or straight to video releases – by the late 1990s in Japan. Annalee Newitz, who has written on the popularity of *anime* in America, notes that even in the early 1980s, over fifty percent of exported Japanese TV shows were *anime* productions. Newitz, interestingly, sees the growth of *anime* in America as a form of Japanese cultural and economic imperialism: "American fans of Japanese animation are in many ways dependent upon Japan not just for material commodities, but for stories. They are, in other words, dependent upon Japanese culture itself. One might say, the American fan has a kind of textual dependence on Japanese culture, the only country which has the power to give him what he wants – a good story. And often, these stories are critical of the fan's national culture as well as threatening to the fan's sense of his own (masculine) power... American fans of Japanese animation might be said to engage, consciously or unconsciously, in an imperialist relationship where Japan is dominant." (Annalee Newitz, "Magical Girls and the Atomic Bomb: Japanese Animation in America," *Film Quarterly* (Vol: 49, No. 1, Fall 1995), p. 12.

mangas upon which most of the *anime* TV shows and movies are based) and international – mostly American – influences; in particular, Disney cartoons, Marvel Comics and Hollywood sci-fi movies. Unlike live action cinema, the visual freedom proffered by *anime* can combine these various influences into a fantastical world at once Japan and other. Therefore, it stands as part of a globalized image form (even as it represents an alternative to the ‘Disneyfication’ of the world) as well as a localized product.

In the context of a nation discourse, two elements are particularly significant: the ambiguity of place and bodies (many characters possess Western and Oriental racial characteristics who are often subject to transformations into monsters, machines, super-beings); and the pacing of the stories tend to undermine a strictly narrative impulse. The background (and at crucial moments the foreground) images often are static, not because they cannot be ‘animated’ but for an emphasis on pictorial form – a holding steady of the image as if in fidelity to its manga origins.<sup>197</sup>

These two tropes of temporality and spatiality – the ‘fixing’ of the image and the foregrounding of a multiracial, non-localized fantastical world – are particularly relevant to *Ghost in the Shell*. As the heroine, Major Motoko Kusanagi -- a cyborg intelligence operative capable of ‘disappearing’ into the environment with the aid of a ‘Thermo-Optical Camouflage’ device and plugging into the network of computers that run the futuristic city – pursues the mysterious hacker known as The Puppet Master, we are introduced into a city that is and is not Tokyo. In fact, Oshii, the director, had travelled to Singapore and Hong Kong to shoot images

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Such a brief introduction cannot do justice to the depth and multiplicity of this mode of filmmaking. I am merely attempting to pick up elements significant to my analysis and *Ghost* in particular. For an insightful and wider

that were then overlaid by animators to create an effect that verges on live action. Kusanagi's form, as well, was modelled on a real human figure to give added 'reality' to her character. As a cyborg, she is a liminal figure, human and not human, female and not female (the film later reveals that 'she' could easily be a 'he'). Interestingly, Kusanagi does not appear to be a sexualized being – she is, after all, a technological creation -- but the film does sexualize her presence through repeated images of her naked body and the barely suppressed desire that Batou, her sidekick, seems to have for her.<sup>198</sup> Indeed, in this futuristic environment almost all humans have been technologically enhanced to give them added strength, vision or stamina; and to have them better interact with computers. Such enhancement has its dark side as well in that characters memories can be erased and 'reprogrammed' to alter their perception of reality. Thus the world of *Ghost* is populated by beings whose humanity is in question, or more specifically have been intimately adapted to their technological environment. The landscape itself -- both Japan and not Japan, both real and animated – suggests the mutability of space. Thus we are in a strange transformative world where what is real/not real, what is seen/not seen overrides the stability of both time and space.

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ranging view, I would recommend Napier's book and the work of Frederick Schodt (*Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*. Berkely, Ca: Stone Bridge Press, 1996.).

<sup>198</sup> In an author's abstract, Carl Silvio writes that

Despite the fact that Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* seems to espouse a political agenda that is in keeping with feminist theorizations of the cyborg, it covertly reworks this agenda into an endorsement of conventional configurations of sexual difference. The film gratifies desires for a strong, multiply-positioned female protagonist who uses technology as a means of empowerment, while simultaneously containing her subversive potential by re-narrating it within an older and better known paradigm: the dominance of masculine mind and spirit over the feminine materiality of the body. The film thus functions as an instrument of ideological containment that seems to be subversive on its "surface" while contextualizing that subversion within traditional narratives of sexual difference.

Carl Sylvio, "Refiguring the radical cyborg in Mamoru Oshii's 'Ghost in the Shell.'" *Science-Fiction Studies* March 1999 v26 i1 p54

The protean nature of *Ghost's* world is underscored by its representational characteristics. The 'freeze' of images – often images of the city – are gestures of narrative interruption, moments of meditative calm that are usually part of Kusanagi's perspective, her point of view. They are connected to her existential quest to find the 'ghost' in her 'shell,' her 'being-ness' apart from the mechanics of her body. As a limnally human figure, she is plugged into the abstract computerized network that allows her to access the city's history, maps, ordinances and so forth even as she is, via the Thermo-Optical device, able to disappear into the city. Her gaze then, directed at the skyline, at crowds, complemented by the ethereal Shinto-inspired soundtrack, is a looking at her self. A search for an identity that is not limited to her but inclusive of the city, a world technologically constructed and managed. Thus, returning to the comparative framework, whereas *Tetsuo* is a random, harsh mechanized look at a human becoming machine, *Ghost* portrays a humanized machine seeking her being-ness in an already technologized world. Both *Tetsuo* (The Iron Man) and Kusanagi (The Cybernetic Woman) are representative of the mechanized human *and* the environment within which they move. In other words, Japan at the end of the postwar, on the cusp of a new age under the spell of the abstractions wrought by technology, by capitalism, by internationalization. They are competing visions, one underlining loss and violent chaos, the other the harmonic convergence of technology in a new space that is integrated and quasi-human. Where *Tetsuo* offers no solace or escape from this existential quandry, positing only a violent and totalizing will to power, *Ghost* acquiesces to the changed world. It seeks to answer the question of identity through the same technological matrix that has brought about the alteration of what is human (or, to nationalize the question, Japanese).

The world of *Ghost* – the opening titles tell us that it is the “near future” where corporate networks rule the day, that “the advent of computerization, however, has not yet wiped out nations and ethnic groups” – is characterized by political assassinations, internecine bureaucratic squabbling and covert *real politic* stratagems. The Puppet Master, it is feared, will destabilize the computer networks holding together this cynical but relatively stable state of affairs. As Kusanagi nears her quarry, however, it becomes apparent that he is equally searching her out. She begins to ‘feel’ him within her ‘ghost,’ and he at one point, suddenly and mysteriously, speaks through her. At this moment, there is a crucial shift in the narrative away from the social and political aspects of the story towards Kusanagi’s personal journey – a quest for meaning, for self. The Puppet Master, it turns out, is not human, but a being born out of the growing awareness of the computer network itself; a consciousness arising out of the technological matrix that ‘rules’ the planet. ‘He’ wants to connect, to interface with Kusanagi so that she can enter into this greater consciousness, this network where everything is interrelated. The culmination of her spiritual journey is the climax of the film. Kusanagi is able to link with another female cyborg, which the Puppet Master speaks through. But the price of this ‘religious’ experience is the loss of her body. She is ripped apart by gunfire, her body disassembled on the floor as she electronically links with the ‘wide and infinite’ net.

Susan Napier argues that the religious overtones of the film are directly related to Japanese culture and religion:

Oshii [the director] states that the “net” can be equated with the myriad gods of the Shinto religion, underlying the notion that Kusanagi’s fusion with the Puppet Master has strongly theological overtones. I might also suggest that the notion of a bodiless union with an amorphous greater entity has clear evocations of the Buddhist concept of nirvana, where the self is said to become like a single drop in a vast ocean....

While the American films [*Blade Runner* and *Robocop*] seem to privilege a kind of individual humanism as a last resort against the enroaching forces of technology and capitalism, *Ghost* simply repudiates the constraints of the contemporary industrialized world to suggest that a union of technology and the spirit can ultimately succeed. In the world of the film, human bonding, human aspirations, even human memories are finally repudiated...<sup>199</sup>

While I concur with Napier's understanding of the metaphysical turn in the film, it needs to go further. The repudiation of the body, linked to protean notions of body, identity and technology in the film, is part of a greater repudiation of social and political concerns. The film's turn towards the heroine's personal quest for selfhood replays a wider social and philosophical dynamic in contemporary Japanese society. As Nishitani and others in the Kyoto School had argued, there is a nothingness underlying all notions of space-time. There is no center, no base as such, that underlies self. Our self -- which is also a no-self -- is not contained by individual consciousness or bodies. The political and ideological effect of such an understanding, however, is that the world is seen as simply there; not something to be changed, for there is no explicit direction (moral or otherwise) in which to take it. Rather, we are linked through an interrelational matrix that transcends both the individual and the material and immaterial world within which we find ourselves. The self is always absent and present within the bodies or structures of the society, always inherent and other, transcendent and intimately there: A ghost in the shell. Kusanagi then, connected as she is to the greater network, able to 'disappear' into the *mise en scène* of the city, human/not human, female/male, is the ultimate representation of the human condition as espoused by metaphysical ideas of being in contemporary Japanese philosophy. From an ideological perspective, however, her abandonment of the body and the wider political

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<sup>199</sup> *Anime From Akira to Princess Mononoke*, pp. 113-14.

arena, replicated in the film's dismissal of the 'socio-political' storyline, is all too reminiscent of the history of these ideas in the world. Rather than the horror of disembodiment, of loss expressed in *Tetsuo*, *Ghost* offers an escape from such nihilism by recognizing the ghost/self/soul/spirit as something both larger and smaller than mere identification with the immediate and apparent, the temporal and spatial fact of existence.

Cazdyn, in reference to these two films, situates the questions of subjectivity and nation more as the product of an incipient globalization, as a kind of 'surplus' or 'excess:'

Tsukamoto Shinya's 1989 *Tetsuo* and Oshii Mamoru's 1995 *Ghost in the Shell* are clearly about the body and subjectivity. *Tetsuo*'s main character metamorphosizes into a metalized scrap heap, while *Ghost*'s Motoko loses her body altogether. The question of the immediate postwar moment (as exemplified in the shutasei debate) was, "What type of I can I be?"; the question forty-five years later is, "What is an I, and how might I exceed this category?" But at the moment at which the problem of the subject, of the "I," can be radically questioned by so many cyberpunks and animators (not to mention so many social and cultural theorists), another problem emerges that has yet to find an appropriate language: the problem of globalization, the problem of a globalized system in which nations are steadily losing their sovereignty. I read *Tetsuo* and *Ghost in the Shell* less as narrating the breakup of the subject and more as allegorizing the breakup of the nation. In short, the "I" is to the "cyborg" as the "nation" is to the "global" – the latter categories destabilize the former.<sup>200</sup>

Cazdyn's reading, like Napier's, is insightful and useful; however, my own position attempts to integrate their disparate positions to arrive at a notion of how the spiritual-philosophical and political-economic can express the national (and transnational) moment. Rather than the characters being principally representative figures of national/transnational allegories, it may be more profitable to see their de-subjectification as representative of the ideological relationship of Kyoto School Buddhism (and its Western correlative: Derridean, post-structuralist thought) with

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<sup>200</sup> Eric Cazdyn, *The Flash of Capital Film and Geopolitics in Japan* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 242-43.



a globalized economic system. The kind of 'self' required by globalization is very close to the type of 'self' theorized by Nishitani and Derrida's postmodernities: decentralized, relational, protean, under erasure, interpenetrated.

Seen as such, the 'de-subjectified' self is a rationalized figure: coterminous with the philosophical positions and transnational globalism of the current political economy I have been describing, yet also indicative of the repression necessary to uphold this abstract notion of subjectivity and selfhood. This spectral figure both mimics the deterritorializing rush of New World Order capitalism, harmonizes with its erasure of presence, of individuality and power while also offering itself up – bodily, culturally, spiritually -- as a sacrifice to the realities of the moment (this new Co-Prosperity Sphere); as it has done in earlier historical contexts. Indeed, as in previous incarnations, it continues to uphold traditional power structures -- that are now even more at liberty to exploit and move about at whim -- through its very malleability, its spectral nature. Thus, to extend Cazdyn's reading, *Tetsuo* and *Ghost*'s lead characters function not only as sites of the deconstruction of the nation, but also as figures in the enunciation of the transnational 'presence.' Their link to notions of cultural and metaphysical specificity (what was once code for nation) have been transformed into necessary elements in the 'grounding' of the human in an increasingly abstract and indifferent global capitalism. Therefore, the human/not human characters in these films, as well as representing the nation -- as an entity under erasure, both present and absent -- are now indicative of how this sense of nation can be utilized to prop up global and economically powerful forces. Rather than the destruction of their bodies solely representing the destruction of 'nation,' they can also be viewed as 'heroic' figures of the New

World Order, able to transform (themselves), appear and disappear at will, morph into whatever is (economically) required.

## CHAPTER NINE:

### Thesis: The Cinema as Nation, the Nation as Cinema

A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history; it is a spiritual family, not a group determined by the shape of the earth. We now have seen what things are not adequate for the creation of such a principle, namely, race, language, material interests, religious affinities, geography and military necessity.<sup>201</sup>

[T]he nation, as a form of cultural *elaboration* (in the Gramscian sense) is an agency of *ambivalent* narration that holds culture at its most productive position, as a force for 'subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding' [Homi Bhabha is quoting Edward Said in the latter part of this sentence]....

The 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself. Nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people; in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation.... What emerges as an effect of such 'incomplete signification' [Bhabha is referencing Jacques Derrida in this phrase] is a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated.<sup>202</sup>

Nationalism has to be understood by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being. (Original italics)<sup>203</sup>

*Between and around the preceding quotes – the 'spiritual principle' of Renan, the 'ambivalent narration' espoused by Bhabha (referencing Said, Gramsci, Derrida and Anderson), the 'large cultural systems' of Anderson – can be found the dynamics of my position vis a vis*

<sup>201</sup> Ernest Renan, translated by Martin Thom in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (NY and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 19. This quote is from a lecture by Renan, delivered at the Sorbonne, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1882.

<sup>202</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Ibid.* pp 3-4.

<sup>203</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 1991), p. 19.

*Japanese cinema and its relation to the concept of nation. Whereas Anderson stresses the importance of a cultural system that underlies particular political expressions of nationhood, Bhabha sees the two in a never quite resolved dynamic tension. He, specifically, investigates the idea of nation to arrive at an understanding of its 'international dimension.' That is, the notion that the boundaries of nation are always uncertain, negotiable; especially in the postmodern landscape. I have some allegiance to all these positions – even Renan's old-fashioned appeal to a nation's 'spiritual' component has some value for me – thus can only invite the reader to bear their comments in mind as the following concluding notes are read.*

No nation is an island: It is always invaded by the Other. Always in a state of oscillation as its internal dynamics are penetrated by exterior forces to which it must adapt. To maintain itself as a separate entity, it must rely not merely on its adaptative processes but on some higher sense of itself that uniquely transcends the quotidian facts of the moment. Some principle of ubiquity must underlie the various incarnations of 'The Nation' to help it survive the vagaries of history.

Japan is one such example. The cinema of the 1950s responded to the sea change, the backwash of scattered debris in the immediate post war period by stylistically and thematically accommodating itself to the new realities of Japanese society, but also by re-asserting fundamental principles that traditionally defined the nation. In the post postwar (mid to late 1980s), on the other hand, this landscape was significantly altered. Japan's sovereignty was no longer in doubt in the same threatening way. But even in the contemporary (postmodern?) landscape, such a threat does exist, perhaps to all nations as the communications revolution and

global economic forces incarnate not at the borders but within them. The beast – Godzilla? – arrives not from off shore, but from within the interconnected links that stitch Japan into the global matrix. This more subtle and pernicious threat, as much internal as it is external, cannot be resisted by spatial accommodation because it is itself spatial. Put another way, the dilemmas of the 1950s were temporal, the shock of the new arriving to dislocate the spatial structures that governed Japanese society. It was a period of rebuilding and increased westernization, modernization, construed to bring Japan into the family of (Western, democratic, capitalist) nations after its prodigal wartime adventures. The cinema reflected and played a role in this transformative process by spatially denuding history, time, the outside of much of their liberating or radical potential. Space was linked to nation – as a spiritual pact existing between people and state – as a way of encompassing change while upholding the integrity of this ‘primordial’ relationship. This can be seen cinematically by the erasure of the historical realities of its war time behavior (*Burmese Harp* and *Godzilla*); the mourning of traditional behaviors and practices that effectively breathed life into them (Ozu’s postwar output); the ‘spiritual’ resolution of individual and social crises as the ultimate solution in a dark and uncertain world (*Life of Oharu* and *Burmese Harp*), and, even if still barbed, the moral reintegration of the individual into a questionable social construct in the absence of any other possibility (*Ikiru*). In this way, on-screen but also as part of the larger *nihonjinron* discourse, Japan as a functioning state and a social construct was repatriated.

By the mid to late 1980s however, such normative procedures carried less weight with the general population. Japan’s economic and technological successes reaped great rewards but the social construct was showing signs of decay. Indeed, the decadence of the 1980s boom may

have speeded up this decay as the technologization of the workplace, faddish embrace of all things new (and Western) and the hysterical consumerism that characterized the era, masked a fundamental unease with the failed social promises of the postwar period. Baptized by a blinkered, self-serving view of history, the immediate postwar decade was about reconnecting to core values and cultural traditions (celebrated as something natural and unique to the Japanese people) while demarcating a place for the new so it would not overwhelm the power arrangement that lurked beneath these cultural celebrations; thus national identity could save face against the great wash of westernization that threatened to wipe clean the elaborate mask of being that so distinguished Japanese society. These strategies of resistance, of accommodation and displacement, were spatial tropes to control the temporal realities threatening the nation and the nation discourse.

The challenges faced in the 1980s, coming at the end of the postwar period (and signalled by the death of Emperor Hirohito), are of a different order. Simply speaking, the 'national identity,' characterized by a practical sense of separation that allowed the new and old, inner/outer to coexist, was now more an example of fragmentation, of disunity. Technological and economic forces, at an individual level, stretches one thin across the globe and, concurrently, increases a feeling of helplessness, a loss of power or a system with which to identify. Even in this most compact, thickly discursive national construct, the potentially debilitating impact of globalization would be experienced and represented.

It was and is not necessarily an instrument of repression. Under the promise of the postnational is a liberalizing and liberating sense of release from the parochial chauvinism of most nationalisms; however, what it may lack, from a Japanese perspective (or is this just my

perspective?), is a vision of being; a metaphysic; an authority, for want of a better word, beyond itself. The answer to this dilemma was already available in twentieth century Japanese philosophy: Being-ness (or Sein) is always 'not-this,' it is beyond (or under) every temporal flow or spatial arrangement yet 'in this,' tied up with most any ascendant spatial or temporal construct. Such a radical Buddhist abstraction – expressed in this way, I hope one can discern its proximity to Heidegger – had, through the experience of the Kyoto School's exponents during the wartime years, been repatriated, bordered by the idea of nation. Now, in the possibility of the postnational, it would transcend even this: one could be Japanese and not-Japanese.

### **The Nation as a Movie**

The customers at the *Tampopo* dinner were grateful for the near perfect bowl of noodle soup, but something in the shiny counter, the cook's immaculate chef's hat, the strangely neutral décor, made them uneasy, out of place. And after they had quickly gobbled down their quickly prepared meals, when they were running back to their *Ikiru*-like workplaces where they must bow their heads down to the whims of the system, this disturbance grew. Did they feel human? Were they just automatons? Were they turning Japanese? Was there something in the brisk efficiency of their lives that seemed false and superficial? Was there, in the very economic and technological success, celebrated with pride in every Sony or Toyota product that smoothly trundled off the line, a small human loss? That postmodernity's spatial arrangement of life in the post-industrial, late capitalist season was somehow empty of meaning and virtue. In the past, to be human was to be Japanese, but now to be Japanese was to be something less than human. At night, the nightmares of disembodiment, of painful and horrific mutations would erupt in a

*Tetsuo*-like transformational frenzy of sexually violent acts. This change could not be othered as something from outside. It was intimately tied up with the technological-economic complex that fractured, disassembled and reassembled the spatial terrain of peoples' lives to attune them to forces that transgressed borders of nation and individuals. The accommodation of time, that the past could effectively be compartmentalized (not erased, but ignored) was something elementally Japanese -- a way of going forward but not changing. Now, however, there was this lived sense of loss, a creeping uncertainty that the ground below one's feet was shifting, trembling. The spatial construct was crumbling, exhausted, like the quasi-human figures -- with their programmed memories, their genetically enhanced bodies -- running through the abstracted landscapes of *Ghost in the Shell*.

If time has been effectively subsumed under space, what happens when space itself is broken, like doll parts upon the playroom floor? What rationalization permits the human? What dream of human progress will call us forward to a brighter day? This is the Zen-inspired critical moment when the ground of space and time is revealed as illusory. No-thing exists, only a blank screen upon which there is the dance of light... like a movie.

To reassert meaning and value, our very humanity, we must recognize that we are ghosts in the shell/machine. If this means the loss of power, of solidity, of individuality, then we can take solace in that we are part of the 'wide and infinite net' that stretches across the globe. We are not noun-like, but verb-like, transitive, able to inhabit any body, any location.

\*



Can we speak of contemporary Japanese cinema this way? Perhaps: The question of national cinema seems to provoke varied responses. As Susan Hayward and others continue to ask (and answer with notions of 'hybridity,' 'fragmentation,' 'fractured subjectivities'), the question of national cinema burns brightly even within the transnational moment:

But what is the territory that a 'national' cinema occupies? For cinema is not a pure product. It is inherently a hybrid of many cultures, be they economic, discursive, ethnic, sexed and more. It exists as a cultural miscegenation, a deeply uncertain product.... The writing of a national cinema is one that refuses to historicize the nation as subject/object in and of itself but makes it a subject and object of knowledge.... Finally, this framing of national cinemas is one which perceives cinema as a practice that should not conceal power and knowledge but which should function as a *mise-en-scène* of scattered and dissembling identities as well as fractured subjectivities and fragmented hegemonies.<sup>204</sup>

Philip Schlesinger also makes a pertinent comment about the sociological basis of much national cinema criticism:

Film studies' use of sociological thinking has been heavily applied to an argument about how the moving image plays variously into the constitution of cultural boundaries.... Social communication theory's functionalism produces an image of a strongly bounded communicative community. Under present conditions clearly this needs to be revised given the increased attention afforded the 'globalisation' of communication – especially the border-circumventing flows resulting from the rapid transformation of electronic media and information and communication technologies. That said, the new wave of concern with global interconnectedness should not make us now envisage the world as definitively 'postnational'. The continuing strong links between modes of social communication and national political spaces remain fundamental for conceptions of collective identity. And it is precisely that connectedness that informs, constructs and reproduces the problematic of a national cinema. But as this issue begins to be rethought in conditions of greater complexity, the underlying social communication theory will need substantial revision. It now must offer an explanatory grasp of the increasingly evident contradictions between the various levels of culture and identity that are tending to decouple state and nation.<sup>205</sup>

<sup>204</sup> Susan Hayward, "Framing National Cinemas," in *Cinema & Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 101.

<sup>205</sup> Philip Schlesinger, "Sociological Scope of 'National Cinema,'" in *Cinema & Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 29-30.

In light of Schlesinger's comment, I was merely playing with my own hypothetical construct that implicitly erases the boundaries between film and society. More pointedly, I thought it was an interesting way to address the metaphysical issues that haunt postmodern discourse; though, inexplicably, they are seldom permitted access into the approved journals. I still maintain that postmodern theory can be linked with the metaphysics espoused by the Kyoto School, which in turn can be fertile ground for the perpetuation of nationalist ideals in Japan (and even, in this transitional moment, the entrance of the transnational into the 'space' of the nation). Others, most notably Homi Bhabha and Benedict Anderson, see the fragmentation and dispersal that characterizes the usual understanding of postmodernism as indicative of an ambivalence at the heart of nation as a symbolic force, and that is analogous to the fragile unity of a realist novel. This 'novel' is never entirely successful; always there is a certain slippage, a lack of closure. I merely garbled the process in the last section to treat the movie(s) as an imagined nation, the nation as an imagined movie.

Not quite a realist movie-nation, however. It is less a realist novel or film and more a kind of magical fiction, at once self-reflexive and illusory, open and closed, as texts go. Or even a kind of catechism or liturgy, a ceremonial text meant to be performed -- and through its performance the adherents to the faith can enter into its shrine of being. Here -- in Japan -- postmodern discourse does not come to bury the concept of nation but exists as a way to subsume difference (outside/inside, self/other, past/present) into a valuation of the sanctity of the nation while still permitting all manner of capitalist -- and transnational -- transgression. Japan is interesting in the postcolonial context because it is a country that was only briefly colonized, yet was willing to adapt to the West by adopting so many of its ideas, inventions and structures. It

self-colonized, so to speak, as a way of resisting the full make-over. Difference was never solely a question of its internal structures but often externalized, as coming from the outside; therefore the game of contextualizing, of bordering these ports of entry, setting up immense 'customs' excises to preclude any erasure of its difference (uniqueness, autonomy) by colonizing or globalizing forces. Japan thus set itself up as different, as much as any orientalist would want it to be. This strategy was to preserve hierarchical, patriarchal and traditional nationalistic forces. It was not meant to be socially progressive but a way to economically advance the country. It was spectacularly successful. It is only in the last twenty years that other non-Western countries (and are they all East Asian? Singapore, South Korea, China, Taiwan? Countries with a similar cultural heritage?) are beginning to catch up or onto the Japanese way.

What does this tell us about nation? Is it just a question of historical, technological and economic forces expressed through communicative practices to provide the moment of nation? Or is it lotus-like? That is, arising out of the blood stained ground to offer its flowered jewel to the heavens. An earthy, bloody, bodily lived time that scars the subject, marks the tribe as belonging to the ground no matter what airy notions of being fills its dream space; that the idea of nation is so deeply embedded in being human that to imagine the postnational is to imagine something inhuman. Such a conception, I believe, still lies at the heart of Japanese nationality; consequently, its cinema must be viewed with this understanding in mind. I do not say this strongly to negate the importance of the communicative notion of nation, but to redress an imbalance. Even as the idea (and possibility) of postnationality begins to dismantle the borders of nation, the Japanese experience suggests that the 'state of being' necessary to navigate the New World Order has to appeal to, or indeed may have to arise from, cultural and philosophical

traditions seen to be indigenous (or at least long-held, well-established). Nation-ness is an adaptive, protean spatiality; made elastic by temporal forces, but spatial nonetheless.

Japanese cinema reflects the elasticity of the nation-space, constructs and is constructed by it. To speak about national cinema therefore, is to recognize just how intimately intertwined with a film's structure and meaning are the principles of nation. Foreign styles, ideas, structural modes of representation characterize all of the productions here examined, but they are often subsumed by nationality, by this sense of national self. They are, in other words, utilized to 'speak' to ideas of (and about) nation beyond the history of their formal properties. It is because of such a conception that -- while I am indebted to the precise historical scholarship being produced by adherents to the concept of 'Historical Poetics' -- I remain skeptical of criticism that gives precedence to the western influenced forms over the particular cultural and historical location within which the films circulate.

My other principal objection, from a purely ontological perspective, is to question whether the 'meanings' of any particular film reside in its formal elements or from the ideological environment into which it enters and from which it emerges. Obviously, the simplest solution is to strike a balance between these opposing critical strategies without erasing their differences or weaknesses. The temptation of a nation discourse is to promote the uniqueness and dominance of the particular cultural and historical environment at the expense of the international influences that may characterize the style of the film. Inversely, formalist critiques run the risk of treating the particular cultural and historical milieu as mere decorative elements -- specific usages of the formal devices of film that are grounded in the 'Royal Road' of narrative that has been constructed out of nineteenth century realist novels and the groundbreaking

narrative structures employed by D.W. Griffith and others in Hollywood in the early part of the twentieth century – that reflect the adaptative capacity of classical narrative cinema. My preference – without, I hope, neglecting to recognize the strengths of the formalist position – has been to attempt to read the formal elements from an understanding of the cultural and historical interplay (not as a ‘cultural history’ but as separate entities) that characterizes Japanese society while recognizing that it has been influenced (though often through co-option) by the West. This is so because I feel film criticism is – as is the film itself -- primarily about the film’s meanings in the world, even as both ‘meaning’ and ‘world’ slide past each other in an adaptive and protean way. In a sense, it is a spatio-temporal understanding rather than a simply a temporally bound analysis that seeks to historicize a film or one that is merely spatial and thus culturally overdetermined.

If no nation is an island, the same can be said for film. The films discussed here bear the marks of this transgression of borders, not only as to what foreign influence come into play in their structures but as to how their structural make up replay the larger discourse of this dynamic. In this way, the critiques are about the films in the world (or on an island). The place of cinema is a border region (a free-trade zone) that reflects (and contributes to) the ever shifting, ever-contested realm of making and re-making nation.

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