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# The Self Seen as Other: Akutagawa and Film

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# The Self Seen As Other: Akutagawa and Film

The last episode of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's "Kage" ("The Shadow," 1920) opens on a movie theater, two spectators sitting in a box discussing the film they had just seen. The episode follows the conclusion of a rather sordid tale of suspicion and murder that the reader had taken until then as pure literature, the appearance of this episode upsetting reader expectations and marking the previous text as the content of the film the spectators had seen.<sup>1</sup> However, the story reveals that what the man and woman saw was not the film noted in the program—the source and nature of their perceptions are put in doubt. In an O. Henryesque move typical of Akutagawa, the reader is suddenly thrust into an epistemologically uncertain position as to the course of events, what may have been perceived, and the nature of the text itself.

One could simply categorize "Kage" as another in Akutagawa's modernist explorations of the ambiguities of knowledge and subjectivity. What is noteworthy, however, is that this episode, and "Kage"'s entire story, revolves around cinema and the process of viewing, being suffused with and structured by characteristics one can call cinematic. It does not merely attach film to a story to lend a fashionable air to a marketable literary text, but rather confronts the filmic phenomenon from a serious critical standpoint, delving into the nature of cinema and its possible uses for literature. "Kage" is cinematic not in the trite sense of being "visual," but in being a text that apparently owes the form of its existence to the contemporary appearance of the cinema in Japan.

Before investigating the possible influences of film on Akutagawa's literary production, a shortcoming of most works in this field of analysis must first be noted. Texts that consider the effects of film on literature often begin their discussion by proffering a list of what is fundamentally filmic, only then to "discover" such cinematicity in a chosen literary corpus.<sup>2</sup> Not only does such reasoning tend to be circular, it is ethnocentric, presuming that Euro-American conceptions of the filmic constitute the universal standard, thereby obviating the analysis of culturally specific appropriations of film. By essentializing cinema, the arguments stifle discussion of how particular cultures—or specific authors such as Akutagawa—can define the filmic medium differentially. It is more historically and culturally specific to determine if what Akutagawa interpreted as defining film affects what he determined to be literature. The analysis of Akutagawa's literature must then be two-fold: It must first determine what his writings represent as peculiar to the medium, and second, discover how that version of cinema has affected his literary product.

While, by his own admission, Akutagawa did not frequently go to films (5:429), and when he did, often did not think much of them,<sup>3</sup> he nonetheless related not only "Kage" to cinema, but also three of his other short fictional works: "Katakoi" (*Unrequited Love*, 1916),

"Asakusa Kôen" (*Asakusa Park*, 1927), and "Yûwaku" (*Temptation*, 1927). The first is, like "Kage," a short story using film as subject matter, while the latter two are actually written in the form of film scenarios (some have called them "cine poems" [Ishiwari, "Asakusa" 44]). Although short stories featuring the new technology film as subject matter were not uncommon at the time (Ishiwari, "Akutagawa" 26-27)—Tanizaki Jun'ichirô, Satô Haruo, Kawabata Yasunari, among others, produced notable examples<sup>4</sup>—the four works contain common themes that do not simply indicate Akutagawa's interest in cinema, but point to a particular attitude toward film. In my analysis, I will concentrate on "Kage" and "Yûwaku," occasionally referring to the other two works.

"Kage" is at first glance a deeply cinematic text not simply because of the last, pseudo-framing episode (which implies that the main story is, in fact, a film), but because its primary story is itself structured around and through a cinematic metaphor. The story focuses on a Chinese businessman who so doubts his Japanese wife's fidelity that he produces a "double" who eventually kills her. The plot, structured with flashbacks and parallel montage, is in the tradition of detective serials such as the French *Zigomar* that were popular in Japan in the teens. In addition, the space of the main story appears to be more a product of the cinematic apparatus than the representation of an independent world. It is a space composed by the play of light and shadow, the story split into light and dark sections with individual scenes being divided by the conflict between the two regimes. The beams of light filtering through the curtained windows or leaking out of keyholes are almost literally the beams of the projector in the theater that etch out on the screen the diegetic space and the characters for the two spectators.

The rays that define the characters also define their relations through the rays of sight, the beam motif being orthographically connected to the primary theme of looking and being watched (the sun rays [*kôsen*] and glances [*shisen*] both sharing the ideograph for "line"). Characters relate by looking at each other and are aware of being watched, the activity of spectatorship serving to link characters and submit them to the spatially other gaze of the theater viewer (the unknown voyeur of Fusako can be, beyond the detective of Chen Cai himself, the film spectator). "Kage" is seemingly about viewing and the power and nature of the gaze, connecting paranoia, scopophilia, and visual investigation to the subjectivity of the film viewer.

"Yûwaku," a narrative of a trial by visual temptation endured by a Japanese Christian in the sixteenth century at the hands of a mysterious Dutch seaman, interweaves the dynamics of sight with the problem of Otherness. Not only are the episodes that Sebastian sees through the telescope conventional narrative segments from different genres and styles of Western film featuring Europeans (Akutagawa, like many Japanese intellectuals of the time, did not report any interest in Japanese film), but the vision is made possible by a technological device coded as foreign under the control of a European (the Dutch Captain). Film in Akutagawa is an alien phenomenon; if Sebastian is being tempted, his spirituality challenged, it is precisely by this foreign filmic experience.

If cinema is articulated through the sign of the Other, it is in part because it exceeds the regulative coding of experience. It is significant that all four of Akutagawa's texts are examples of *gensô bungaku* (literature of the fantastic) and that it is film, more than anything else, that figures as the preeminent sign of the fantastic in these works. Basic to Akutagawa's portrayal of the fantastic quality of the cinematic medium is a questioning of the indexicality of the cinematic sign. It is this quality of being a trace of a profilmic event authenticated by a technology considered scientific that is usually seen as justifying the characterization of film as an art of truly recording reality. "Kage" in particular questions this as well as the ontological status of the art form itself by portraying a filmic text that is not a trace of a profilmic reality, but rather a work whose own reality has been put in doubt. In Akutagawa, the rationalistic forms of creation represented by cinema are themselves strange and Other, marking modernity and industry as somehow beyond the Japanese norm.

Several factors, however, indicate that in Akutagawa's depiction, cinema is not wholly assimilable to this East-West binarism. The cinema portrayed in these texts also arises from

another space somehow seen as Other: that of the hidden recesses of the Self. For as much as these texts conceive of industrialization and its impersonal regime as Other, that industrialization was at the time becoming a central part of Japanese life. This increasing Westernization is articulated in a displaced fashion in "Kage" and "Yûwaku" in their depiction of the role of the psyche of the spectator in filmic production. Film to Akutagawa is the creation not only of an impersonal technology, but also of a self increasingly technologized, split, and unknown to itself.

"Yûwaku," for instance, cannot simply be the tale of the confrontation of East and West since Sebastian's tempter, the Dutch Captain, is only the projection of his self, arising from Sebastian's shadow. "Yûwaku," by repeating the shadow/*doppelgänger* theme of "Kage," locates the conflict over identity not between a unified Self and a unified Other, between "Japan" and the "West," but within Japanese subjectivity itself.

"Kage" interestingly connects this split in identity with the problematic of seeing, both in the case of the film seemingly manufactured by the two spectators at the end (who remain ignorant of their role in this process), as well as in the example of Chen Cai watching his wife from outside her window. The latter episode is itself a spatial allegorization of the film viewing process. Chen remains immobile in the dark, his hidden desires giving life to his double through a form of projection that corresponds with his utterance of his wife's name, "Fusako."<sup>5</sup>

Chen's doubling is pre-figured in the plot (the event takes place later in the story), when Chen is first at the keyhole. The text reads, "One hour later, Chen Cai discovered himself at the door to his own bedroom, eavesdropping like a burglar with an ear pressed to the door" (Akutagawa 2:265). The verb "*hakken suru*" ("to discover"), containing the ideograph for "to see," underlines the fact that Chen is gazing as much at himself as at his wife. His doubling is thus a result as much of the splitting of his gaze as of his desire. Chen is unable either to separate himself from what he sees or to confirm his identity by discovering, as in a mirror, the Self in the Other; Chen, the film viewer, is left divided and powerless. Chen's "film," fueled by suspicion and desire, results only in death and self-castration. Just as it is Otoku's involvement in the screen image in "Katakoï" that makes her devote her life and her love to a screen lover (thereby losing her sanity), in Akutagawa's work, it is this involvement in desire that is the horror and tragedy of cinema. To him, film does not function to fulfill desire or even to play with it in the unique way Hollywood film does, but to openly use it to undermine the spectator. Out of the viewer's control, the desire involved in film threatens to undermine a stable subjectivity by articulating emotions normally left unspoken.

The filmic Other, somehow simultaneously alien and part of the self, is also gendered in a complex manner. Even though most of the film-like spectators in Akutagawa's work are men, with women frequently the object of their gaze (Fusako, for instance, is literally paralyzed and made silent by the unknown viewer), the male viewer is not empowered by possessing the gaze. Note that the first instance of the word "kage" in the body of the text of "Kage" is when Fusako returns "a shadow of a smile" (*bishôrashii kage ga sashita*) to her servant, orthographically connecting her to the double and Chen's Other (Akutagawa 2:263). The same smile also plays in the eyes of the female spectator at the end of the work (*bishô no iro*) (Akutagawa 2:269). On both occasions, the women know more than the male spectator does (Fusako about her affair, the woman viewer about the film) and seem to signal that fact in a slightly erotic fashion. They reveal nothing, however, causing frustration and making obvious the male spectator's ignorance.

The gaze investigates, sometimes causing violence, but never without rendering the spectator impotent. In Akutagawa's problematic of cinematic spectatorship, watching a film is not the case of a viewer defining "his" subjectivity through the Other from a position of power (by objectifying women, for example), but rather of a subjectivity that is castrated through the power and knowledge of the Other. Paralysis occurs, as in the case of Chen Cai's double, especially when the Other returns the gaze, immobilizing the subject in his ignorance. The viewer may be male, but his position is certainly not masculine (in posses-

sion of the phallus, the ability to speak, etc.). Confronted with a powerful but mysterious Other—the cinematic medium—the subjectivity of those confronting cinema becomes free-floating, literally lost (as with the lost boy in “Asakusa Kôen” whose powerlessness is reflected in the loss of a father who remains missing at the end).

In Akutagawa's version of cinema, the problem is that the Other (and film) is ultimately unknowable. The spectators at the end of “Kage” are unsure of what they have just seen, a confusion echoed by the reader: does “Kage” refer to the film they have seen, what we have read, Chen's double, or to something else? Is it singular or plural?<sup>6</sup> The text—language itself—may be the ultimate Other.

If cinema raises for Akutagawa the problem of the construction of Self and Other, it is in part due to the realization that cinema possessed a mode of enunciation profoundly different from that of contemporary Japanese fiction. The dominant mode of literary enunciation in Taishô Japan (1912-26) was the *shishôsetsu* or “I-novel.” The *shishôsetsu*, as Barbara Mito Reed has pointed out, took advantage of qualities of the Japanese language in which there is less of a distinction between the first- and the third-person than in English, in order to combine the three elements—character, narrator, and author—into a single voice, a sole enunciator speaking the text, or, more specifically, the emotional truth to which the text is subordinate.<sup>7</sup> This is what Edward Fowler describes when he claims that “the *shishôsetsu* turns out to be not so much a first-person, as a single-consciousness narration . . . and one, moreover, that makes no distinction between the narrated and the narrating subject” (28). This single-consciousness narrator is not necessarily distinct from the reader. As Fowler notes, “the convention of the author as an actor who played himself had the effect of drawing the reader closer to the narrator-hero and creating a bond. . . . Out of this relationship emerged the institution of the *bundan*” (XXV). The *bundan*, the Japanese community of literati, supported a system of enunciation in which the divisions between character, author, and reader were dissolved. Each *shishôsetsu* was more properly a product of the *bundan* than of an individual author; to borrow Fowler's term, each was more properly a “we-novel” than an “I-novel” (6).

If the *shishôsetsu*, as it is often said, established a criteria of realism in which a text was truthful to the extent there existed a correspondence between authorial experience and literary enunciation, then objective reality entered into the work only in so far as it had been mediated through the coded subjectivity of the triad author/narrator/character. The reader could only accept the text as true or authentic to the degree she adapted her role in producing the text to the dominant enunciative strategy.

It is against this system in which object, author, narrator, and reader work parallel to one another that cinema's mode of enunciation was constructed as strange and mysterious. The prewar Japanese aesthetician Nakai Masakazu argues as much when he pointed out that the filmic text does not bear the copula “de aru” or “de nai” found in Japanese literature that serve both as expressions of judgment and as marks of enunciation. To Nakai, cinema, by remaining non-judgmental and seemingly unenunciated, shifts the center of meaning production from the author/text to the spectator, entrusting the role played by the copula in literature to the “historical subjectivity” of the masses (40).

Akutagawa's works appear to bear the historical traces of the Japanese encounter with a cinematic enunciative system defined as different. When Otoku in “Katakoi” describes the experience of seeing her “screen lover” disappear at the end of the film, in her eyes it was not the case of his suspension in a fictional world until the next movie, but of a literal “erasure” approximating death (Akutagawa 1:210). Not only has she failed to see the cinematic signifier as imaginary, she has been unable to accommodate film's objectivity as a signifying system to the system she is used to, where character and textual enunciation are homologous. She thus “mistakenly” couples the end of the film with the end of her lover, tying his enunciation of himself to that of the film, his subjectivity with the film's objectivity. A similar problem can be seen in “Yûwaku” in the first filmic vision when, according to the text, “the cottage moves up closer to the window,” a perception that confuses camera enunciation with object movement.<sup>8</sup> Here, objects, no longer subordinated to the codes of

authorial subjectivity, literally take on a life of their own.

"Kage" elaborates on these problems of enunciation. Although the main story (the "film") is clearly narrated in the third-person, the filmic enunciation is ultimately not attributed to an enunciator separate from the spectator, but, with the author seemingly absent, to the spectators themselves. The two spectators at the end, however, can neither acknowledge their possible creation of the text (it remains a mystery, something to be silent about), or even determine what the text was. Like the figure of Chen Cai, who produces his own film by actually acting out the story himself (his self, like his creation, remaining unknowable), the two spectators participate in the mode of cinematic enunciation without being aware of what they are doing. As with "Yûwaku" and "Katakoi," "Kage" offers an example of the phenomenon of text and audience working at cross purposes, the viewers exhibiting difficulty reading the film because of the foreignness of its mode of enunciation.

To Akutagawa, film represented a resurrection of the problems of subjectivity and enunciation. As nineteenth century European realist literature earlier confronted the Japanese Naturalists with an alien form of enunciation founded in an impersonal, third-person narrating subjectivity, film appeared to be an even more alien form of subjectivity to Taishô writers. For while the mode of production of European literature was not too foreign, centered as it was in the individual craftsman, cinema was founded on a new regime of technological, industrial creation where a human being no longer spoke the text, but seemingly a mysterious machine, the camera. The entire textual experience was different. Objects in the world shown in film seemed no longer dependent upon authorial enunciation, but rather resisted the confines of previous codes of definition and signification and produced their own meaning.

Noriko Lippit has noted the role Akutagawa played as a forerunner in the modernist movement that cast doubt over the realist pretense of a secure, fictionalized world centered around a unified narrating presence (68). It is now possible to argue that Akutagawa's role was in part a product of his confrontation with the alien mode of enunciation represented by cinema. Akutagawa's *oeuvre* as a whole bears the marks of his encounter with cinema. With the ambiguity of the self and the image of a divided subjectivity serving as structuring themes in Akutagawa's literature as a whole, it is difficult to divorce such a thematics from his vision of cinema. "Futatsu no tegami" ("Two Letters," 1917) and "Haguruma" ("Cog-wheels," 1927) contain the image of the *doppelgänger* just as "Kage" does, and "Hyottoko" ("The Clown's Mask," 1915) evinces the problematics of split identity also found in "Yûwaku." Since this version of what film is has elements in common with the visions offered by other writers such as Tanizaki and Kawabata (as I have argued elsewhere<sup>9</sup>), Akutagawa, while possessing his own particular conception of cinema, did not define film as he did wholly because of his personal world view. Akutagawa's literature is clearly indebted to the larger contextual dynamics of a Japanese society coming to grips with a new, seemingly strange medium.

We should recognize, however, that Akutagawa's relation to cinema was profoundly ambivalent. While he denigrated the medium at one moment, saying he rarely visited the cinema, he proceeded to devote considerable energy to accommodating his literature to its presence. To him, film was both fundamentally Other to yet somehow a product of the hidden recesses of the Self. This ambivalence is visible in the roles cinema played in Akutagawa's literature. On the one hand, cinema functions in his work to complicate the apparent oppositions between East and West, traditional and modern, that many see as central to his work. Film is not wholly definable as "Western" or "Eastern" precisely because it complicated the boundary between those terms, being in his vision a product of both the West and Japan. Cinema is central to Akutagawa's literary expression of the hopelessness of maintaining the distinctions between Self and Other in modern Japan. By featuring characters who are in no way "purely" Japanese as his filmic spectators (Chen is Chinese and Sebastian, Christian), Akutagawa comments on the impossibility of personal or national identity in the age of mass culture.

On the other hand, Akutagawa's appropriation of cinema becomes a means of construct-

ing a new identity. Because he decided to confront the challenge of cinema not by making films but by attempting to express its Otherness within his literature, Akutagawa was not only acknowledging the changing semiotic landscape of Taishō Japan, he was also attempting to regain control over meaning by inscribing what presented a threatening new language, film, in a more familiar semiotic system, literature. While Akutagawa's depiction of the cinematic medium as fantastic served to designate the medium as foreign and Other in one sense, one should keep in mind that during this historical conjuncture, there were serious attempts to reclaim the fantastic as central to the narrative of national identity. The work on native folk tales by Yanagita Kunio, Origuchi Shinobu, and others represented as much the effort to reassert native forms of knowledge in the definition of Japanese identity as the founding of a new form of domestic ethnology.<sup>10</sup> Figuring the cinema as fantastic is to simultaneously and paradoxically both mark it as Other and to try to appropriate it into native modes of discourse as part of the Self. The self seen as other on the motion picture screen is returned, in a curious fashion, to the native fold. Akutagawa's incorporation of cinema into his literature is a contradictory effort to recognize the loss of Japaneseness while simultaneously attempting to construct a new identity through that loss. The presence of film in Akutagawa's literature is deeply imbricated with the ambivalence and turmoil of the Taishō era, before the moment when literature "returned to Japan" in the 1930s and less ambiguously served the project of constructing a homogeneous national identity.

A.A. Gerow

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Dudley Andrew, Harry Harootunian, and Tom Rohlich for their comments on previous manifestations of this paper. An earlier version was delivered at the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs, Iowa City, Iowa, 15 Sept. 1991. All Japanese names appear according to Japanese custom with the family name first.

<sup>2</sup> The works of Claude-Edmonde Magny and Keith Cohen are examples of this strategy of argumentation. See Magny's *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction Between the Two Wars*, trans. Eleanor Hochman (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972) and Cohen's *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Akutagawa said he found most movie plots peculiarly forgettable (4:252).

<sup>4</sup> Other examples from this period include Satō Haruo's "Shimon" ("The Fingerprint," 1918), Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's "Jinmenso" ("The Boil With the Human Face," 1918), and Kawabata Yasunari's "Teki" ("The Enemy," 1925) and "Warawanu otoko" ("A Man Who Does Not Smile," 1927).

<sup>5</sup> Akutagawa, 2:266. An English translation of "Kage" is available in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and Dazai Osamu, *Akutagawa and Dazai*, trans. James O'Brien (Tempe, AR: Arizona State UP, 1988): 91-102. All quotations in this paper from Akutagawa's works are my own.

<sup>6</sup> In Japanese, the title can be equally singular or plural, an ambiguity that is lost in English.

<sup>7</sup> See Barbara Mito Reed, "Chikamatsu Shūkō: An Inquiry into Narrative Modes of Modern Japanese Fiction," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 14.1 (1988): 59-76. The lack of a significant difference between the first- and third-person narration is exemplified by the fact that most "I-novels" were actually written in the third-person.

<sup>8</sup> Akutagawa 3:380. Arthur Waley has published a translation of "Yūwaku" under the title "San Sebastian," *Horizon* 117 (1949): 190-200.

<sup>9</sup> See my "Celluloid Masks: The Cinematic Image and the Image of Japan," *Iris* 16 (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Harry Harootunian for helping me clarify this argument.

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