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# Kawabata and cinema: the ambivalence of knowledge, medium, and influence

AARON GEROW

**Abstract:** Many researchers have considered the involvement of Kawabata Yasunari in cinema and the medium's possible influence on his literature. Such approaches, however, tend to assume a definition of the motion pictures as visuality or montage that then influences Kawabata instead of first considering Kawabata's own conception of cinema, his own film theory. By analyzing his writings on film, including his film criticism, short stories involving cinema, and his involvement in the film *A Page of Madness*, this paper outlines Kawabata's conception of cinema and argues that he developed a portrait of cinema that posed it as a challenge to identity, perception and knowledge itself. Often associated with the female body, the movies became to Kawabata both an object of fascination and a threat, something ultimately to be controlled through literature and the literary subject. What influenced his literature was then perhaps this perception of cinema as posing an epistemic crisis. It is his ambivalence towards this challenge that can serve as a key for elaborating on Kawabata's complicated location within prewar modernism.

**Keywords:** Kawabata Yasunari, cinema, film theory, epistemology, identity, female body, influence, Japanese literature, modernism

## Presuming cinema

The novelist Kawabata Yasunari's involvement in the 1926 film *A Page of Madness* (Kurutta ichipeiji, directed by Kinugasa Teinosuke) has sparked research not just on his contributions to that masterpiece, but also on the influence of the motion pictures on his literature. My question, however, is less about how a presumption of what cinema is can be found reflected in his writings, than what his writings say about the film medium. Problematizing the predominant approach

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to analyzing the relation between film and literature, I argue that, instead of appropriating a known cinema through literary means, Kawabata used his literature to question, in what was eventually a profoundly ambivalent fashion, both the possibility of knowing cinema (epistemology) as well as the existence of a unique existence that can be known (ontology). An investigation of cinema's involvement in Kawabata's work should thus also consider Kawabata's actions as a film theorist, concerned with the question of what cinema is, while at the same time recognizing his problematization of that theoretical project itself.

*A Page of Madness* has long been the focus of attention not simply for its own contributions to film history, but also for the involvement of Taishō literary modernists such as Kawabata in its production. I have published one book on the film in English (Gerow 2008), there is another in German by Mariann Lewinsky (1997), as well as numerous articles in English, Japanese and other languages (Peterson 1989, Gerow 1998, Abel 2001, Gardner 2004, Park 2005, etc.). A good deal of the writing on the film has focused as much on the contributions of the future Nobel Prize winner or his colleagues in the Shinkankakuha (the New Sensation Group), as on the work's unique textuality or production history (Kawamoto 1987, Toeda 1999, 2011). This trend is not necessarily a problem, because it has served as the occasion for discussing the intersections of cinema and literature in the interwar period, particularly over a history of the senses, often with the result of complicating previous narratives that conceived of a pure literature evolving on its own, apart from such crass media as motion pictures. It has, however, tended to tilt the discussion towards literature, considering more how cinema may have served or affected literature rather than the other way around.

The result has been some illuminating considerations of the effect Kawabata's encounter with cinema had on his literature, not only in the form of fictional works such as 'The Man Who Did Not Smile' (Warawanu otoko, 1929) or 'A Wedding and a Funeral' (Konrei to sōrei, 1926) that are directly based on his experience on the *Page of Madness* set, but in shifts in his ways of writing that appear to present cinematic forms. Toeda Hirokazu (1994, 1999, 2011, 2013) and Chung Hyang Jae (2008) have been particularly productive in this regard. Toeda, for instance, has likened the frequent use of the present tense to the experience of motion or continuity of cinema, or the short sentences ending with nouns (*meishi-dome*), found in the script to *A Page of Madness* published in Kawabata's complete works, to film shots, and located similar stylistic devices in later literary works such as 'Crystalline Fantasy' (Suishō gensō, 1931) and *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (Asakusa kurenaidan, 1929–1930). To Toeda, the latter in particular appears to use cinematic techniques, such as the high angle panning long shot to express the modern city (2011). Such accounts are not merely the product of critical speculation: Kawabata himself once admitted that 'description in literature has undoubtedly advanced by learning from the techniques of cinema' (Kawabata 1982, vol. 30, p. 430; hereafter *KYZ*).

Such attempts to locate the influence of cinema on literary form and content, however, can sometimes be based on problematic assumptions. Focusing on the effects of film on literature, for instance, often treats the definition of cinema as given and insufficiently considers the effects of literature on film. Certainly there are numerous studies of cinematic adaptations of literary works, but another more fundamental line of inquiry is how literary articulations of film, such as linguistically based notions of signification, may have helped shape conceptions of cinema itself (Gerow 2000). The classic works on the relation between literature and film in Europe and America, including those by Claude-Edmonde Magny and Keith Cohen, offered significant analyses of the influence of film on the novels of James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, but through a methodology that initially offered a list of what is fundamentally cinematic, and then ‘discovered’ such ‘cinematicity’ in a chosen literary corpus (Magny 1972, Cohen 1979). They, in other words, *assumed* the existence of an essential medium called film and certain cinematic traits, without considering how the encounter with literature may have, perhaps dialectically, operated to create or define film. Even when considering the reverse vector, the influence of film on literature is usually kept on the surface, as an issue of style, instead of asking how cinema may have altered the very being of literature.

Such approaches are at worst ahistorical, and at best, a mode of projecting the present (e.g. the analyst’s conception of cinema) on the past. Claims that literature becomes more cinematic by borrowing forms of sensation, such as visuality (the camera gaze) or the method of montage, presume that cinema is defined by visuality and montage. That ignores both the long history of cinematic examples that are centered neither on visuals nor editing, as well as the historical struggles cinema underwent in order to be defined as visual or the product of montage – in other words, the fact that perception of and by cinema was itself historically constructed. Japanese cinema up until the mid-1920s, for instance, was often defined more by sound (the voice of the benshi narrator that helped shape a film’s meaning) than by visuality; it pursued modes of narration in which editing assumed a minor role; and it in fact celebrated a form of cultural mixing in which the very notion there was a unique essence or single medium ‘cinema’ that could ‘influence’ another distinct single medium was not yet fully formed. It was certain groups of intellectual critics and filmmakers, that in a trend loosely called the Pure Film Movement (*Jun’eigageki undō*), spanning the mid-1910s to the 1920s and centered in journals such as *Kinema Record* and *Kinema Junpō*, attempted to establish the notion of a unique medium ‘cinema’ defined by its visuality, often for particular ideological and cultural reasons (Gerow 2010). If Kawabata’s novels after *A Page of Madness* seem to be more visual or evince forms of montage, it was because he was influenced less by cinema, than by the discourses that advocated such ideological definitions of cinema. His discourse, in turn, could be said to take part in this creation of the motion pictures.

Determining if what Japanese authors interpreted as defining film affected what they determined to be literature is arguably more historically and culturally specific. Such an analysis of their literature then, first determines what their writings represent as peculiar to the cinema (especially amidst the politics of defining cinema at the time), and second, discovers how that version of cinema has affected their literary product. This article will help lay the foundations for such a study of Kawabata Yasunari by examining both his essays on cinema and his fictional representations of cinema to distill a kind of theory of film. I would contend this mode of analysis is in fact a better means of approaching Kawabata's relation to film than simply arguing that he was influenced by cinema. The latter presumes not only an essence to film that affects Kawabata, but also that Kawabata knows what this essence is or is able to grasp it. As I will argue, this assumption occludes one of the crucial aspects of Kawabata's approach to film: that to him, cinema, both in its material industrial form and in such tropes as the body of the actress, is fundamentally a problem of epistemology or perception. The issue of the knowledge of cinema was not only of personal concern to Kawabata, as he frequently wavered in his assertions of cinematic knowledge in his writings on film, but also at the core of his doubts over cinema, which he often portrayed as undermining existing forms of knowledge, sensation and enunciation. To put it simply, it is difficult to presume a knowable essence to film that influences Kawabata because he doubted such knowledge itself.

### **Masks of knowledge**

One of the possible manifestations of Kawabata's doubts about cinematic knowledge is his own movement back and forth on the subject, claiming in some essays his own familiarity with the medium, while in others denying that knowledge and even critiquing others who claim it. At times, knowledge of cinema appears to be a mask Kawabata dons in order to mock those who assume mastery of the medium, a feint that itself can represent the questioning of epistemology itself, an interrogation I argue is aligned with cinema.

One of Kawabata's first essays on cinema after *A Page of Madness* appeared to declare his knowledge of film, playing with the Japanese term 'eiga nyūmon' ('introduction to film') to both proclaim his entry through the gates of the film world, and offer his introduction to cinema for others: 'From Kinugasa and other specialists, I received instruction on many aspects of practical knowledge. Thanks to that, I am on the path to understanding the methods of film criticism' (Kawabata 1926). The production of *A Page of Madness*, for Kawabata, became a concrete example of understanding that cinema is a collaborative and composite art, one that requires knowledge of both other arts such as music and literature, as well as uniquely cinematic techniques, in order for it to be good cinema. Such declarations of the need for knowledge, especially when directed against contemporary Japanese film producers, certainly align Kawabata with the Pure Film Movement, the effort starting in the 1910s to modernize Japanese cinema

that placed the notion of ‘kenkyū’ or ‘research’ at the core of film reform (Gerow 2010). Producing a true film – which is what Japanese filmmakers failed to do according to reformers – required knowledge of the essence of cinema and thus study to attain such knowledge.

Kawabata’s notion of cinematic knowledge deviates slightly from that of his reformist contemporaries, however. The Pure Film Movement was first a movement in film criticism before it was a trend in filmmaking, and it is often cited as the origin of Japanese film criticism (Gerow 2014). What distinguished true film criticism to these reformers was precisely its basis in the theoretical knowledge produced by ‘kenkyū’, rather than in the practical or even haptic knowledge of the ‘hidden efforts’ that Kawabata stressed lay behind the completion of a film (Kawabata 1926).<sup>1</sup> Kawabata’s knowledge of cinema was different, one less focused on the essence of the medium, but it was productive in its own way. One of the attractions of ‘A Wedding and a Funeral’ or ‘The Wedding Dress’ (Hanayome sugata, 1929), for instance, is precisely his manipulation of the language of the studio, especially in the dialogue, which provides a strong impression not only of actuality, but also of Kawabata’s authority over this space.<sup>2</sup> If we can call this realism, it could align with Kawabata’s own acknowledgment of cinema’s capacity to record reality: ‘There is no art like cinema that can take in nature as is’ (KYZ, 26, p. 175).

Kawabata’s cinematic realism, however, is also a code, a mantle that Kawabata could assume in order provide the impression of cinema and knowledge of it. We know this in part because Kawabata later foregrounded the constructed nature of this performance of cinema and its problematic relation to knowledge. One of his sole efforts at film criticism was a series of two pieces, published in the November and December 1929 issues of *Shinchō*, entitled ‘A Record of Film Viewing’ (Eiga kenbutsuki). His task was to write about a group of recent films, both foreign and Japanese, most of them talkies. While largely disparaging these works, he seems knowledgeable about the films and their filmmakers or performers (discussing the American actresses Clara Bow and Mary Pickford in some detail, for instance), and can at times be quite profound about the nature of sound in cinema, even as he laments the state of the talkie.<sup>3</sup> There is even a section discussing Fyodor Ostep’s *The Living Corpse* (Zhivoy trup, 1929) – which featured the famed director Vsevolod Pudovkin as Fyodor – in which Kawabata appears as perceptive as the top critics of his day. Immediately after that section, however, Kawabata then confesses: ‘Or so I’ve seemed to say, but in fact I’ve just copied this from the program of the Cinema Palace’ (KYZ, 26, p. 302). The effect of this reversal is quite stunning, as our expectations are undermined and we begin to wonder whether or not any of what he has written in ‘A Record of Film Viewing’ is the product of his own perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

Kawabata lays the foundation for this questioning from the start of ‘A Record of Film Viewing’, where he doubts his own knowledge of film, as well as the purpose of even having such knowledge. Seemingly contradicting his earlier glee at learning the ‘hidden efforts’ behind a film, he begins by declaring,

‘If [a film] doesn’t work with me, I just absent-mindedly stare at the foreign landscapes and beautiful women; when it does, I laugh and cry as they manipulate me. I think that’s the secret for leaving film forever as a fresh entertainment. I therefore have never thought of wanting to obtain knowledge of cinema.’ (KYZ, 26, p. 294)

At first this reads like the statement of a casual film fan who does not want his entertainment spoiled by intellectualization, but there is more going on here. To begin with, it connects with Kawabata’s doubts about his own knowledge of film. Especially at the start of the second installment of ‘A Record of Film Viewing’, which comes after disparaging so many films in the first – and getting complaints from the likes of Yokomitsu Riichi about that – Kawabata humbly wonders whether his perception that these movies are dull results either from the fact he ‘does not have an eye for cinema’ – a problem of sense or perception – or from the fact the works themselves are boring (KYZ, 26, p. 315). The author leans towards the latter, but in a way that undermines even that knowledge, as he simultaneously calls his writings ‘bad form’ (*busahō*) (KYZ, 26, p. 314). Ignorance, however, becomes a way of distinguishing himself as he satirically opines that he must ‘know nothing about cinema’ if those in the know apparently praise such poor films (KYZ, 26, p. 300). Donning the mask of cinematic knowledge by copying the expert program notes – and then revealing the mask – was then a way for Kawabata both to ridicule such assumptions of film knowledge, and to question the epistemology of cinema itself.

Note that the formal strategy of creating an epistemic frame – a structure of knowledge or perception about something – only to undermine it, is one of the dominant tropes in *A Page of Madness*. It is first introduced with the trackback of the dancer at the very beginning, where we first see her in a glittering costume and luxuriant surroundings, and assume this is a real dance revue (Figure 1), only to have that assumption undermined as the camera moves back to reveal a barred window that both exposes this as her fantasy and implicates the viewer in her delusions (Figure 2). Repeated several times in the film, this trope’s cumulative effect is to perforate the membrane between reality and illusion, sanity and insanity, and question the nature of perception. One can argue that his reversal in ‘A Record of Film Viewing’ has a similar effect, as Kawabata, by donning the mask of the film critic, only to throw it away, is questioning less the assertion that some knowledge of cinema is groundless (presumably because it is wrong), than that there is knowledge of cinema at all.

Masks play a crucial role in *A Page of Madness* (Figure 3), but they also function in his short story ‘The Man Who Did Not Smile’, a fictional work about a scriptwriter working on a film in which masks are to appear at the film’s conclusion. Towards the end of this story, the writer visits his wife in



*Figure 1* The dancer in *A Page of Madness*



*Figure 2* A track back reveals the bars, overturning her fantasy



*Figure 3 Masks in A Page of Madness*

the hospital, where his children make her put on one of the masks. When she removes it, the contrast between her face and the beautiful mask makes her ugliness more pronounced. The children attempt to force the mask on the protagonist, but he refuses, noting both his desire not to appear ugly to his wife, as well as a certain fearfulness embodied in the beautiful mask. In the writer's words: 'that fear aroused in me suspicions that the ever-smiling gentle face of my wife might itself be a mask or that my wife's smile might be artifice, just like the mask' (Kawabata 1988, p. 132).<sup>5</sup> I have argued that the mask in the story functions in part as a metaphor of cinema (Gerow 1993, 2008). The implication is that the danger of cinema embodied in the mask derives not only from its escapist covering up of reality, an act which, because it must always fail, only makes reality all the more unbearable, but also from the strength of its mode of signification to turn reality into merely another image, an effect Tanizaki Jun'ichirō also emphasized (Gerow 1993, Lamarre 2005). But while Tanizaki was enthralled by this quality of cinema, Kawabata's attitude is more fundamentally ambivalent: at the same time film provides specular seduction, it threatens to undermine the subject and the very reality that maintains the division between sign and referent, subject and object. Returning to 'A Record of Film Viewing', we can argue that Kawabata makes an issue of cinematic knowledge not just because film theory or film criticism have inadequate access to the medium, but also because cinema to

him, as is evident in ‘The Man Who Did Not Smile’, questions both perception and the epistemological subject.

### **Bodies of knowledge**

A close analysis of Kawabata’s other short stories related to film can further expand on his ambivalent questioning of cinematic knowledge. Interestingly, they repeatedly connect cinema to the bodies of women, who are often subject to male gazes and attempts to ‘know’ them, but in ways that often turn back on such attempts at mastery and knowledge. These stories can effectively function as both Kawabata’s literary experiments in filmmaking and embodiments of the epistemological problems of cinema itself, particularly as they may relate to literature.

Kawabata actually penned quite a number of stories in the late 1920s and early 1930s that feature the cinema, after his involvement in *A Page of Madness*, including ‘A Wedding and a Funeral’, ‘The Wedding Dress’, ‘The Man Who Did Not Smile’, ‘The Enemy’ (Teki, 1928), ‘Location Hunting’ (Rokēshon hanchingu, 1929), ‘Pathé Baby Answer Sheet’ (Pate Bebi no tōan, 1929), ‘Privileges of Youth’ (Seishun no tokken, 1930), and ‘Revenge’ (Fukushū, 1932). Interestingly, they all center on the female body and the problems of knowing it. The women involved are mostly film actresses: in ‘A Wedding and a Funeral’ and ‘The Wedding Dress’, actresses who must play an insane woman dancing in a sideshow entertainment wearing a wedding dress; in ‘The Enemy’, an actress viewing herself on the screen; in ‘Location Hunting’, an actress going on location with a film director; in ‘Pathé Baby Answer Sheet’, a woman featured in several versions of an amateur film; in ‘Privileges of Youth’, an actress mistaken for another woman; and ‘Revenge’, a woman attempting to literally become the actress she looks like. The loss of virginity – their exposure to carnal knowledge – is the issue for many of them, with Chiyoko in ‘The Wedding Dress’ declaring that she can join the film crew because she has ‘finally ceased to be a girl’ (KYZ, 3, p. 103), with Tomoko in ‘Location Hunting’ described as losing her body line (*karada no sen*) because of her sexual involvement with the director (KYZ, 21, p. 373), or with Kumiko in ‘Privileges of Youth’ forced to hear a story of her fall from grace (*hatan*) after working in a dance hall and becoming a film actress (KYZ, 21, p. 394).

The last case suggests that a woman’s association with film is itself a loss of purity, reinforcing stereotypes linking actresses with women in the so-called ‘water trade’ (*mizu shōbai*). They are subject to the male gaze and are structured as, in Laura Mulvey’s terms, ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 1988, p. 62). One image Kawabata decided to keep when turning ‘A Wedding and a Funeral’ into ‘The Wedding Dress’ was the moment when an actress, waking up after napping on the film set during a night shoot, complains of cold drops falling on her neck. The physical explanation is that condensation in the glass-roofed studio had

begun dripping on her, but a male actor jokingly offers another interpretation, which suggests that the moon is viewing her glass-enclosed body and is salivating in desire (*KYZ*, 3, p. 95, *KYZ*, 21, p. 104). The violence of the male gaze is reinforced narratively by the fact that male figures – the screenwriter in ‘A Wedding and a Funeral’, Mizushima in ‘The Wedding Dress’, and even Tsubouchi and Kiga in ‘Privileges of Youth’ – combine public and private in relation to the women, what is seen on screen and what is experienced in reality, and seek revenge on women for losing their virginity, in the first two cases precisely by punishing them on screen, via the cinematic apparatus.

As is evident in the quote from ‘A Record of Film Viewing’, being able to ‘absent-mindedly stare at the foreign landscapes and beautiful women’ was part of the pleasure of cinema for Kawabata, one that could prefigure such later Kawabata works as *Snow Country* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties* in which women become a spectacle for the male protagonist. Yet if women are associated with the motion pictures in Kawabata, with the cinematic gaze seemingly seeking to know and punish them, his version of cinema also renders this specular narrative complex. In ‘The Enemy’ and ‘Revenge’ it is women who possess the gaze and seek revenge. Women can be the object of that revenge, but often through a perverse case of doubling, with Tsugiko in ‘Revenge’, raised in poverty and falling into prostitution, seeking revenge on the famous actress Abe Suzuko precisely because she looks like her – as if making her mirror image her enemy. Doubles exist in ‘Privileges of Youth’ as well, with much of the narrative playing with the possibility that the virginal Ranko is Kumiko’s suppressed split personality (in the melodramatic ending, however, Ranko turns out to be Kumiko’s daughter). With the mirroring and multiplication of identities, the knowledge of women is deflected and bifurcated. The supposed certainty of Tomoko’s loss of maidenhood in ‘Location Hunting’ is confounded when she asserts that such an impression is merely an effect of costuming and lighting. When the story ends with her ‘correct’ image – ‘the naked image of the virgin, young like early summer, reflected in the purified mirror’ (*KYZ*, 21, p. 374) – it only reinforces the impression that identity, perception, and knowledge are problematized by mediation.

‘The Enemy’ in particular foregrounds the possibility that cinema is less the means of confirming knowledge of the female body, or of punishing it through the violence of the knowing gaze, than a hall of mirrors, muddling knowledge and identity. The ‘cinema actress’ views herself on screen and is doubled: ‘The two of them – the she that watches herself and the she that is being watched – cry at the same time’. What they view – a ‘horrible’ moment from the past (likely the loss of virginity through rape) – is neither a memory nor a form of projection or empathy, since she ‘felt as if she was experiencing it with her own body now’. Her cinematic experience thus not only breaks down the boundaries between reality and representation, body and image, but it also multiplies identities and even temporalities, to the point that the actress felt ‘she had until then lost her virginity three times. In other words, she was a virgin three times over’ (*KYZ*, 1,

p. 55). In film, what could never be regained is repeated, and the carnal knowledge by a man of a woman becomes undone and un-known. In the story, this repetition and temporal disjunction could be explained as resulting from the actress's experience of trauma, but, as an allegory of cinema, 'The Enemy' implies that identity and epistemology themselves suffer the effects of trauma caused by cinema (Gerow 1993). The motion pictures' association with revenge and violence is not just gendered, but also directed at the core of knowledge, temporality and identity.

Kawabata's repeated return to these moments of cinematic violence may not simply be the result of his own (traumatic?) encounter with film, but also his pleasure in how they cut up and questioned a perceivable space-time. 'Pathé Baby Answer Sheet' represents one of Kawabata's most significant efforts to explore the possibilities of cinematic construction. The two-page story is set at an amateur film club, where a character termed 'R' brings back from his summer trip to the beach a film made using the French 9.5 mm film system, the Pathé Baby.<sup>6</sup> Having shown shots of a young lady running on the beach in a striped swimsuit – a woman who happens to be in attendance at the screening – R asked the other club members to provide 'answers' on how to finish the movie, which are then projected as films. Each answer produces a different kind of motion picture: the first reveals a male voyeur and then upsets his male gaze, the second turns the female body into a commodified spectacle, the third pursues the situation as a comedy, and the fourth domesticates it by shifting the scene to a mother and child playing in a garden. The fifth answer, provided by E, concludes the story:

E's answer: A shot of the young lady running towards the camera and filling the screen is followed by a cut to a close-up of a public restroom.

When the lights in the room were turned on, to everyone's surprise, E and the young lady had disappeared during those brief films. The club members, thinking 'me too', all stood up and headed towards what appeared in E's answer. (KYZ, 21, p. 386)

One can sense here a bit of the same poisonous wit that Kawabata directed at the film-critic community in 'A Record of Film Viewing', deriding in this case a film world seemingly slavish to the suggestions of cinema. One could, however, also read 'Pathé Baby Answer Sheet' as an exploration of cinematic construction. Reading the editing in E's answer as narratively motivated, one could assume that the woman is running to the bathroom, a meaning that the film's spectators do not just intellectually understand but also physically enact. It also could explain why the lady and E disappeared – they too had gone to relieve themselves. But such a narrative reading of film form is problematic because 'Pathé Baby Answer Sheet' foregrounds the problem of interpretation. Lacking a clear beginning, middle, and end, it is mostly comprised of layers of disjunction, with

the five unrelated answers taking up more than half the entire story, and several of the answers themselves being disjointed. More than a conventional narrative, Kawabata's story is both an exploration of the paradigmatic dimensions of cinema as well as an embodiment of the polysemic possibilities of non-continuity editing.

Just as the story explores different options for film form, the reader is encouraged to explore different readings of the story. One account can treat E's answer more metaphorically, taking the cut from the lady's body, filling the screen, to the lavatory, as sexual, an interpretation that then offers a different view of her and E's disappearance: they have escaped on a tryst. Another is more experimental, interpreting the jarring cut to the toilet as an undermining or even repudiation of narrative. It is a break or even a reversal of the narrative flow that disturbs knowledge and formally resembles the devices in 'A Record of Film Viewing' or *A Page of Madness*. The female body fills the screen, as if now fully known, but perhaps because it thus overwhelms the screen, such knowledge descends into absurdity, with the body itself disappearing from the story, no one knowing where it went. As such, it could be Kawabata's celebration of the radical possibilities of montage, but in a short story that multiplies narrative options and interpretations, even that account is problematic. What has supposedly been cinematic has in this story been reproduced in literature, and literature itself has become the medium for engaging in film theory. This may lead to another explanation why his protagonists escape the space of cinema. With each reading of E's answer being paired with an interpretation of the events after its projection, we could add another one and tie a perception of its radical narrative break with a break with cinema itself, a refusal to know it. Even as Kawabata is seemingly perfecting his exploration of the possibilities of film form, he re-encounters his inability to know it – or its inability to be known – through the female body, and perhaps with the disappearance of that body, flippantly escapes like E from the realm of cinema.

### **The ambivalent mask**

I would argue that Kawabata's ambivalence towards cinema is evident in how he wavers in his use of the medium, donning the mask of film but taking it off, fearing it but remaining entranced by its powers. His representations of both himself as the scriptwriter of *A Page of Madness*,<sup>7</sup> or of the scriptwriter in 'A Wedding and a Funeral', often present the image of a cinema that is fundamentally dependent upon a good script (as he declares in 'Introduction to Film'), and thus within the control of the writer. However 'The Man Who Did Not Smile', 'A Wedding and a Funeral', and even 'Diary of the Shooting of *A Page of Madness*' (Kurutta ichipeiji satsuei nisshi, 1926) all also speak of efforts by writers to cover up their dark, seemingly unbridled creations with brighter moments (the mask, the dancer, etc.), but in ways that are clearly futile. Often associated with the

female body, cinema is similarly the subject of efforts to grasp and corral it, even as it serves as an object of fascination, without those efforts fully succeeding.

'A Record of Film Viewing' is then perhaps a contradictory effort to assert such control. For even as it questions knowledge of cinema, it can do so in a way that cordons it off from other arts, as Kawabata at one point wonders whether writing about talkies as art is not like trying to discuss sports matches as art (*KYZ*, 26, p. 315). While cinema's challenge to knowledge was in part what made it open up new territory for artistic creation – as Kawabata declares in 'Introduction to Film' in language resembling that of the American film Western – marking it off as separate from knowledge is also a means of keeping its challenge at a distance, rendering it 'entertainment' and not 'art'. This, one can argue, helps Kawabata reiterate his position as a literary subject in 'A Record of Film Viewing', declaring that as his perspective when viewing these talkies: 'I am a writer and no doubt I want to critique all arts using a literary standard' (*KYZ*, 26, p. 315).

Like many others, he complains of the early talkies betraying the achievements of silent cinema art: 'Since turning to talkies, cinema has lost much of what it had contributed to the literary arts. It is once again clinging to the pants of literature' (*KYZ*, 26, p. 301). That, however, might reveal what cinema became to Kawabata: more a supply of contributions to literature, than a challenge to literature and the authorial subject itself.<sup>8</sup> Toeda Hirokazu is right in arguing that one of the main fruits of Kawabata's encounter with cinema was a rediscovery of what literature was (Toeda 2011, p. 23). Kawabata's complaint that the motion pictures had in a sense returned to slavishly emulating other arts with the talkies again echoes the discourse of the Pure Film Movement, which made medium specificity paramount. Kawabata's rediscovery of literature through cinema was itself not an encounter with a pre-existing cinema but rather a construction of the medium as one that is separate and that does not challenge the divisions between media. This is a cinema that exists as useful only to the degree it is a reinforcement of literature, keeping the authorial subject safe from cinema's challenge. This is a form of cinematic knowledge, and perhaps one that affected his subsequent writing. But if he uses cinema in literature as visuality and montage, it was based on knowledge of cinema that as much confined film as celebrated its new forms of perception. We can talk about Kawabata's film theory: a conception of cinema that certainly followed in the steps of the Pure Film Movement, but deviated from it due both to the profound realization – and fear – that cinema cannot be theorized, as well as to his subsequent attempts to either contain or escape the implications of that.

Kawabata's deep ambivalence towards cinema suggests a far more ambiguous relationship between film and his literature than previous accounts describe. Moments that can seem so cinematic can actually be uncinematic – given that to Kawabata the 'cinematic' seems to remain unknown and undefined. As this paper has shown, time and time again moments of epistemic crisis – from the reversal to 'A Record of Film Viewing' and the first scene in *A Page of Madness*, to the identity of spectatorship in 'The Enemy' and the conclusion of 'Pathé

Baby Answer Sheet' – appear to invade and haunt the cinematic in Kawabata, less defining the cinema than repeatedly challenging attempts to define film.

Perhaps it is that interrogation of knowledge – and not simply a given conception of cinema – that ended up being one of the greatest influences of the medium on Kawabata. It was then not as much a new sensation than the problematization of sensation that was cinema's challenge. If we are looking for an influence of film on Kawabata's work, perhaps we should not just seek out moments of visuality or montage, but also moments of epistemic crisis, where not only the perception of identity but also the foundations of literature are being questioned. Still, given Kawabata's ambivalence, such cinematic moments – often gendered and imbricated with violence – may also be vain attempts to know an unknowable medium, just as they could also be efforts to corral cinema's threat to knowledge by linguistic force and by means of literature. This can be one additional avenue for researching the relation of cinema to Kawabata's literature. Kawabata may be less a modernist writer under the influence of a modern medium, than a complex figure actively and ambivalently engaged in shaping – or evading – what he himself suggested was cinema's modernist challenge. That perception could become a course for elaborating on Kawabata's complicated location within prewar modernism. What makes Kawabata's relation to cinema important is not just how he, as a modernist, utilized cinema to explore new forms of literature, but also how he became a contradictory figure, one astutely foregrounding cinema's challenge to existing modes of knowledge, subjectivity, and artistic production, while often desperately – and sometimes ineffectually – trying to place a mask over its madness.

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## Notes

1. Note that impressionist criticism, the dominant trend in film criticism spurred by the Pure Film Movement, was much less concerned with inside information than with the perceptions of the cultured spectator.
2. 'The Wedding Dress' is a reworking of 'A Wedding and a Funeral'. The latter was first published in the July 1926 issue of *Shinshōsetsu*, right after the filming of *A Page of Madness* in May (the theatrical release had to wait until September). The former, printed in the April 1929 issue of *Wakagusa*, re-uses several sections of 'The Wedding Dress', while significantly altering others, eliminating, for instance, the central character of the screenwriter.
3. His comment, for instance, when discussing Frank Capra's *The Donovan Affair* (1929) that only a talkie can truly present a scene that is pitch black is quite astute, and echoes Bela Balasz's notion that silence only becomes meaningful in cinema through the coming of sound (*KYZ*, 26, pp. 299–300).
4. Perhaps it would be too much to ask whether this is not also the case with his script for *A Page of Madness*, which is included in his complete works, but, as recent research has shown, involved

- considerable contributions from Sawada Bankō (Kinugasa's assistant), Inuzuka Minoru (a Shōchiku scriptwriter) and others (Gerow 2008, Kawabata 2009, Kawakatsu 2011).
5. Note that the use of the terms 'onna' and 'geijutsu' ('Onna no bishō wa kono men no yōna geijutsu de wa nakarō ka') expand this to a problem of gender and art.
  6. The Pathé Baby system was developed by Pathé Frères in 1922 and was soon sold in Japan, becoming the most popular amateur film system until the spread of 8 mm and 16 mm systems.
  7. In 'Introduction to Film', he boldly talks about how 'my scenario *A Page of Madness*' was produced into a film (Kawabata 1926), even as his other accounts admit his failure to provide a script in time. See, for instance, 'Diary of the Shooting of *A Page of Madness*' (KYZ, 33, pp. 18–24).
  8. The period between 1926 and 1932 – the primary years of Kawabata's involvement in cinema – might reveal a shift in his opinion of and approach towards the medium, and even of the reasons for his possible movement away from film. The later works do seem to lack his early enthusiasm towards film, although I would argue a complex and ambivalent perception of cinema is evident from the start, even in *A Page of Madness* (Gerow 2008).

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