ACTING THE ROLE OF GODS: SHINODA MASAHIRO'S CINEMATIC CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE ABSOLUTE IMAGE

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The narrative structure and formal style of the director Shinoda Masahiro's films reveal his ethical objective to encourage his viewer to engage with works of cinematic representation as the creative products of human agency that they are. Within his period films, Shinoda hopes to stimulate recognition of cinema's genealogical inheritance and reproduction of the absolutist propositions underlying traditional Japanese cultural forms. He posits that these have redirected essential human drives into masochistic self-effacement in tribute to a divine ideal imaged in the Imperial polity.

By disrupting the illusion of cinematic realism which simply serves to reinforce Japanese culture's existent intertextual networks, Shinoda seeks to reground cultural expressions in their material and human origins. This acts as the first step to imagining a Japanese subject outside of the limited definitions posed by nostalgic absolutism and its reactionary antithesis in the equally self-destructive mode of global capitalism.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

> "Our *nouvelle vague* was highly educated with refined sensibility, and though we were shaken by the ambivalence which had permeated the world of active filmmaking, Oshima was determined to inject political ideology into the world of film. As for me, my idea was that I wanted to create drama out of the fact that humans often act out the role of gods, and soon become unable to recognize whether they are divine or merely human."
> -Shinoda Masahiro, 2003[1]

The director Shinoda Masahiro, a luminary of the fragmented 1960s progressive cinema movement often dubiously termed the "Japanese New Wave" (*nūberu bāgu*), thus defined his task as a filmmaker in 2004. Shinoda's ambivalent relationship with his peers is evident: he locates himself within the avant-garde cohort of the New Wave, while simultaneously rejecting the validity of the Marxist political solutions many of its participants proposed for postwar social reconstruction and recovery from a militaristic national consciousness. Shinoda asserts that without efforts to alter the understood meaning of traditional relations between subject and state, even a communist or democratic government would be built upon the same authoritarian metaphysical foundations that have plagued Japanese political ideologies since the emergence of Yamato[2] culture.

For Shinoda, the power structures that shape societies are necessarily established by fallible humans who have forgotten their mortality amidst the hubris of power. Political power structures develop as gatekeepers to an hypothetical utopian state of being, creating rituals of submission in the guise of sociocultural roles that gesture towards an absolute image of harmony. Thus, as human beings take it upon themselves to administrate social relations by acting as agents of a transcendent cultural authority, the authentic value of a common material experience is displaced. It is in this director's own nation of Japan where the dangers of absolutist (*zettaiteki*) cultural propositions were put most cruelly on display during the Imperialist military regime of the first

two decades of the Showa period (1925-1989), and where the assertion of the Japanese subject's primary value as a political object reached its peak.

Okamura Ryo writes that "the continuously smoldering feelings towards the existence of the Showa Emperor who declared defeat on August 15th have become a major motif of the films of Shinoda Masahiro. The significant question emerging from that event, 'What makes one Japanese?' (*nihonjin to wa?*), has come to bear such large impact on the psychology of the people that for Shinoda it is something that cannot be ignored."[3] For Shinoda, who experienced the militarist era firsthand as a child, the current shape of Japanese society has been formed by the intense ideological trauma resulting from that moment. As the director describes it, "the Japanese who would have *died* for the Emperor the day before now were forced to cross the border marked by Hirohito's Declaration of Humanity (*ningen sengen*)[4] and *live* democratically… That said, it is impossible to consider that a complete psychological 'gear change' from life to death can happen within a single day."[5] In this director's conception, to understand the despair of the postwar, one must examine the means by which a nearly two millennia-old cultural authority undermined through defeat continues to be referenced by the Japanese political order as a model for manufacturing social consent. Shinoda takes the Imperial basis of Japanese power, which retains the shape of the Yamatai polity from which he asserts it originated, as a historically verifiable given: "In my films, I have tried to show the present through the past and history, coming around to the truth that all Japanese culture flows from imperialism and the emperor system. What characterizes Japan is the imposition upon the people of absolute power and authority without the right to question and debate."[6]

In Shinoda's films, depictions of this imposition of Imperial power almost never take the form of direct repressive violence by a state actor against a subject. This makes his works stand apart from other noted films of the postwar humanist cinema, such as Kobayashi Masaki's anti-war epic *The Human Condition* (1959), wherein protagonists are victimized by sadistic *kempeitai* (secret police) and other agents of militarism. Rather, Shinoda's protagonists are often positioned

as the agents of their own oppression, their social conduct and understanding of social relations modeled on nostalgic cultural ideals whose interests align with those of long-extant political structures of power. The aestheticized masochism as seen in the rationale behind *seppuku*, double suicides, and even the neurotic self-denial of the modern salaryman acts as result of ideological conditioning of an always-already interpellated Japanese subject, for whom violent self-effacement gestures towards the ideal by obliterating the imperfect subjectivity that frustrates its perfect embodiment.[7] Due to its applicability to Shinoda's depictions of his protagonists as simultaneously objectified subjects and reproductive agents of Yamato cultural ideologies, this thesis will occasionally rely on terms presented within Althusserian discourses of interpellation to discuss Shinoda's cinematic depiction of Japanese social relations.[8]

I maintain that Shinoda's primary intent is to challenge the empty absolutism he perceives at the core of Japanese culture by critically apprehending the aesthetics of pre-modern Japan through a form of cultural materialism and semiotic theory often associated with 20th century thinkers such as Althusser, Benjamin and Barthes. This objective manifests in many of the director's films in a reflexive depiction of non-diegetic elements that propel the narratives, overtly inscribing the production within his cinematic product to alienate the spectators and bring them into conscious negotiation with the propositions laid out by a work of art. While cinema scholars will be inclined to associate this approach with the theatrical mode of Bertholdt Brecht, highlighting the component parts of performance to stimulate active engagement with the dramatic work has been well-demonstrated as also characteristic of the presentational mode of the traditional Japanese theater. This is particularly apparent in the emphatic anti-realism of Jōruri and Nō, which Shinoda had studied at Waseda University prior to his emergence as a filmmaker. A large number of Shinoda films, but *Double Suicide* (1969) in particular, thus cleverly make use of the tools already present within the discourse of Japanese performing arts to reveal the external material basis upon which the internal self-referential reality of a cultural system is founded. The striking contrast between the misleading representational mode of cinema and the subversive

potential of the presentational mode of Japanese theater that is exploited within Shinoda's films has been commented on by a host of semioticians, from Roland Barthes in the 1950s, on to Noel Burch in the late 1970s. Citing the "reassertion of logocentrism and the emergence of an ideology of representation" that supported the rise of the bourgeoisie in 18th century Europe, Burch contrasts the "ideology of the transparency of the sign which dominated the emergence of the Western film from its 'primitive' stage" with the "inscription of the signifying process in the 'text' which is such an essential characteristic of the traditional Japanese arts, and which was to influence the development of Japanese cinema in this [the 20th] century."[9]

It has been noted by many cultural theorists that the medium of cinema is particular among the arts for its ability to manipulate visual, aural and temporal reception to invest the audience in a constructed ideological space. Walter Benjamin posited that this totalizing cinema experience inherently inhibits a sustained recognition of a work's diegesis *as a creative product*, laying the groundwork for new habits of thought to an extent unprecedented among the traditional arts:

> Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception… Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise.[10]

In recognition of this, the film experience is seized upon by Shinoda as a problematic site of representation, where technological advances have allowed for an expressive medium that can create a totalizing image of "reality" from disparate sites of creative control (lighting, editing, sound, set design, etc.). To draw an audience into this false relationship with the cinematic image as more than a vehicle for subjective expression is an unethical act for Shinoda: "Reality for its own sake is not what interests me. If my films had to be perfect reconstructions of reality, I would not make them. *I begin with reality and see what higher idea comes out of it.* [italics mine]"[11]. A director who, as noted above, struggles to challenge absolutist perspective, Shinoda submits that

the art of cinema has been co-opted by conventionalized production of a dishonest, single-perspective illusion of what we find onscreen as that image of unfiltered reality. Along with his peers in both the French and Japanese *nouvelle vague*, he rejects the transposition of capital-driven Hollywood aesthetic mystification of national cinema through employment of formal elements that violently intrude upon the putatively sacred space of the diegesis.

In the three *jidaigeki* (period drama) films I will discuss in the scope of this thesis, it is the apt deployment of contrast between diegetic representations of historical "fact" and the disruptive and individualized formal elements that Shinoda introduces that provide impact to his juxtapositions. This too draws comparisons with the theories of Brecht, as explicated by Esslin:

> Non-literary elements of production – décor, music and choreography – also retain their independence; instead of serving as mere auxiliaries of the text, reinforcing it by stressing some of its features and painting in atmosphere, mood, or descriptive details, they are raised to the level of autonomous elements; instead of pulling in the same direction as the words, they enter into a dialectical, contrapuntal relationship with them.[12]

Shinoda often strives to intensify and then relax the incongruity of each piece of the filmmaker's toolbox with the other parts, highlighting their respective role in the construction of a rationalized worldview and attempts to draw the audience into accepting it as a reflection of reality. Shinoda's films submit that this subversive inscription of production process within the product, all but lost in the embrace of Euro-American cinematic realism, can be relocated and revived to challenge the suture effects of the screen which complement the absolutism already present in Japanese metaphysics.

In recognition of this, my secondary task will be to analyze how the three historical films focused upon in this piece use different modes of representation to accomplish the task of disassociating seemingly straightforward narrative from realism in order to indicate the material (and thus fallible) basis of ideological production. Whereas *Assassination* uses contrastive editing and lighting patterns to demarcate differing levels of narrative mediation, *Double Suicide* uses cinematic technology to overtly emphasize the presentational aspects of Genroku-period puppet

theater to startlingly Brechtian effect. Meanwhile, *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees* is more judicious in approach, establishing the presence of the uncanny within the mundane through punctuated moments of formal manipulation, and consistent indications of an aesthetic genealogy that defies the image of the unchanging absolute.

Shinoda also has sought to define his cinema's values against not only against a cinematic convention most often associated with the ideals of the American production system codified during the interwar period, but other modes of totalizing perspective as well. One target of criticism by Shinoda is the films of his directorial mentor Ōzu Yasujiro,[13] who Yoshida convincingly argues for as a filmmaker who "simultaneously played with and criticized [Hollywood convention's] unique grammar" in his own right.[14] Shinoda finds that Ōzu's films, while magnificent works of art, are problematic in their representation as they fall prey to the impulse of absolutist perspective through the repeated and fastidious assertion of a highly individualized formal language. This, he argues, creates an image of Japan where potential pluralities of aesthetic value are dismissed, and an implicit assertion of the subjective as objective - which ought to be transcended - is re-established.[15] While recognizing that film is inescapably a combination of many personal expressions, the ethical challenge for Shinoda is to disabuse the viewer of false notions of the camera's organic perspective, whose authenticity is falsified by the existence of the camera frame and the editing room.[16]

Through a critical analysis of *Assassination* (1964), *Double Suicide* (1969), and *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees* (1974), I argue that Shinoda, while stimulating awareness of the conventions of cinema, seeks to first genealogically demonstrate intertextuality[17] as a primary virtue in art since the earliest ages of Japanese culture. His films present the relationships of Japanese society as founded upon the propositions of a self-referential cultural network, which works to interpellate subjects with the ideology that absolute value exists transcendent of material existence. By positioning the ultimate satisfaction of human desires beyond the reach of the subject, cultural authorities have historically posed themselves as gatekeepers to the ideal. These

three *jidaigeki* illustrate that through their self-effacing drive to revere and embody aesthetic images of a mythicized past as beheld in performance and literature, free subjects themselves reproduce the ideologies through which they are made into objects of political utility. Thus does a self-referential and self-regenerating cultural system founded on absolutist metaphysics, most strikingly beheld in the Imperial image,[18] continue to survive in Japan in spite of the brutality of the last century that has putatively obviated their place in the post-1945 'democratic' order.[19] Shinoda's self-professed ethical obligation as an artist to address the twin threat of the reemergence of nostalgic absolutism or a reactionary turn away from all markers of traditional identity thus manifests in a quest to disrupt the illusory realism of cinematic representation and encourage confrontation with the human origin of all cultural constructs.

In these three films in particular, Shinoda suggests that the anti-materialism that has developed within the merging of Neoconfucian social relations and animistic *kami* mythology is formative of the glorification of violence and masochism as acts of submission witnessed within the Japanese sense of pathos. Selected aesthetic elements drawn from Japanese history were promoted as emblematic of higher virtues and crystallized into loci of national sentiment in the late Edo and Meiji periods.[20] This has created, in this director's eyes, a state founded on conceptions of a singular and organic definition of a Japanese character: an eternal national spirit which exists beyond human influence and is founded on misleading ethnic particularism. "I think it is very violent to assimilate man with nature as the Japanese have done," says Shinoda. "In a certain sense, it means a denial of society. And if there is a foreign society corresponding to Japanese society, the Japanese will not admit it. They see themselves as distinctly separate from all foreigners."[21] Even following the horrific defeat of the Pacific War that occurred in spite of assurances of a special connection of the Japanese *kokka* ("national household") to an ultimate realm of spirit,[22] the values of submission to cultural and political authority continue to be embraced in Japan in spite of evidence provided by the nation's ever-changing material circumstances.

It is, of course, important to recognize that it is problematic to assert that a code of values is homogeneously distributed among an ethnic group, culture, or religion. For a filmmaker like Shinoda seeking to define the shape of Japan's national identity crisis, the initial challenge is to identify a common identity that is threatened in the first place. For Shinoda, involvement in the cultural community of Japanese is not the matter of blood or ethnic spirit often cited by *nihonjinron* ("Theory of the Japanese") advocates. Rather, in Japan and elsewhere, it is an individual's subjection to the interpellation of a cultivated aesthetic discourse, disseminated through literature, theater, and now film, that defines his or her place in a national community.[23] Even claiming Japanese as a mother tongue only serves as a marker of belonging insofar as linguistic signs tie to the culturally specific metaphoric ones through which the meaning of cultural works is positively received and embodied through social conduct.[24]

For Shinoda, the cognitive dissonance cultivated in order to sustain the absolutist mode of Japan's existential regard of its national character has ensured a society-wide proliferation of nihilism as it becomes apparent that social gestures carried over from the feudal era all indicate a glaring void once occupied by the *kami* and the Imperial image. The hedonistic cynicism of the *taiyozoku* ("Sun Tribe") movement, the emphasis on crass, self-consuming capitalism as a road to "progress", and the revival of nationalism and Imperialist nostalgia are all presented in Shinoda's films and writings as evidence of subjects' reactionary responses to the society-wide sense that postwar identity is profoundly empty.

In this environment, Shinoda's consistent effort to reject any ultimate meaning behind constructs of culture is striking, and it is important to ask where his observation of nihilism places him within the artistic dialogues of 1960s Japan. While certainly respected alongside other filmmakers of his era for his significant role in the Shochiku New Wave and the Art Theater Guild, Shinoda's willful commitment to ideological deconstruction over Oshima-esque cinematic activism appears to prove frustrating to critics who desire a more politically active stance. This elusiveness, combined with a fascination with violence as expression, the bleak conclusions that

often accompany his narratives and a thematic interest in depicting protagonists' entrapment within seemingly insurmountable social structures, leads some reviewers to primarily associate Shinoda as a director with the reactionary and unproductive form of nihilism that occupies the subjects of his films. "The distrust of authority and *resignation to the unchanging nature of the national character* [emphasis mine] engender a certain aloofness in Shinoda's work,"[25] says Tom Mes. To be sure, Shinoda's most well-known quotes, such as "I find that politics lead to nothing, and that power politics remain empty,"[26] do not particularly serve to dissuade his critics of this notion of his reactionary dismissal of the possibility of significant social change.

However, what Mes perhaps fails to realize is that, rather than seeking to reinforce his protagonists' cynical perception of their submissive relationship to meaningless cultural edifices, the source of true tragedy in Shinoda's films emerges from his subjects' self-effacing failure to realize that the terms of Japanese identity themselves are products of a historical materiality in the style of Benjamin. Without a recognition of the Self's inherent value as a subject rather than as an object through which externally-determined social goals are realized, the exploitative nature of Japan's basic political relationships cannot possibly be reckoned with. There is a palpable faith in the indomitability of the material reality of human passions present in all of Shinoda's so-called "nihilistic" works. Even as our species continuously attempts to assert new logical structures over its experience according to the changing ideals of each age, Shinoda posits that we only re-confirm the fact that one's "real feelings as a human cannot be controlled."[27]

In recognition of this, the director posits that the most ethical act that can be realized by a filmmaker is to affirm the value of individual human experience by formally rendering violence unto depictions of social institutions and relationships as natural law. Embracing the same revolutionary spirit underlying the Epic theater of Brecht, it is first and foremost *confrontation* with authorial presence that Shinoda demands through his works.[28] As one understands that Shinoda's intent is to induce active resistance to totalizing ideological constructs, one can see his films and supplementary writings as emphasizing the *plurality of potential subjective meaning*,

rather than *the lack of objective meaning* – resisting a false binary which seems to pervade the postwar Japanese imaginary, with absolutism on one side and nihilism on the other. Thus, I argue that rather than an argument for nihilism as a natural response to the circumstances of Japan's 1945 defeat, Shinoda's works instead show it as a consequence of the struggle to assert one's essential humanity within a society historically defined through consistent reference to a single image of 'Japaneseness.'

Shinoda's idea that this struggle defines every epoch of Japanese history at a basic level is illustrated within his filmography though in the central role of violence to his subjects' expression of desire in conflict with social norms. Violent expression along the Freudian categorical lines of erotic and destructive drives is consistently depicted by Shinoda's films as "the best way to communicate with other human beings" – even to the extent that he posits that "it is impossible to understand another culture without going to war with it."[29] The form of violent behavior thus primarily acts to affirm the values of a subject, either manifesting as performative[30] submission to social norms or asserting a conflict with individual desires and cultural expectations. This conception of sex and violence as the supremely intelligible expression of discrete psychological interiority evidences a realm of human experience beyond culture-specific structures that can be directed, but never tamed. For this director, the aggressive fervor that has occupied human subjects across civilizations and eras is without a doubt the trademark of our species, "the root of all human passion, the fundamental enthusiasm of the human being."[31]

Beauty, the other great motivator of human action, is often expressed in the work of Shinoda as an erotic function of violence – requiring a subject's dynamic struggle to express his/her conviction in disregard of laws, morals or common sense.[32] Claiming Charles Baudelaire's work *Fleurs du Mal* as a source of inspiration,[33] the director portrays resplendence within the visceral abjection his characters experience, seeing them as evidence of the indomitability of the human spirit in the face of repression. To reiterate, Shinoda perceives the

self-destructive grasping at the sublime[34] represented in *seppuku* or *shinju* in many of the great works of Japanese culture merely reflects a desire for transcendent satisfaction of essential human drives.[35] As we shall see in Chapter III, the doomed couple of *Double Suicide* (1969) kill themselves not simply because they feel they must fulfill an established cultural narrative, but because they believe that the framework of that narrative is the only way to reconcile the realization of their irresistible passions (*ninjo*) with the expectations of them as social beings (*giri*). Phelps keenly articulates this tension when he writes: "All of Shinoda's films seem to teeter between material interpretations of violence at beauty's root through Japan's history, and Shinoda's own abstraction of violence into something beautiful."[36]

This is a trenchant observation on Phelps' part, for Shinoda's films recognize not only that the subjects beheld onscreen are interpellated products of a problematic cultural environment, but that he as creator too is constantly being hailed by and molded as a subject through his placement within the intertextual network of cultural referents used to communicate his values in art. Shinoda's work shows that he himself is keenly aware that, as an artist seeking to appeal to his audience on an aesthetic basis, he cannot avoid functioning as a reproductive organ for the cultural ideologies from which his sense of aesthetic value emerges.

> "I exhaust myself striving to begin filmmaking with an open mind and avoid being swept up by interpretation of historical facts. And still, as soon as the camera rolls, I am troubled to find that my passion for certain things overtakes me, and I am completely unable to find my passion in other areas. Amidst that anxiety, the fact that I am constantly digesting is that *what we term history is always unbalanced*. [emphasis mine]"[37]

Shinoda's clear effort to reveal the presence of his own creative agency in his films becomes all the more critical to undermining the inauthentic representation inherent to cinematic expression, ensuring that his works are beheld, in accordance with his ethical imperative, as creative products and not as objective documentation of historical 'realities.'

As the reader might surmise from the overview given so far, this thesis is intended to be an auteurist analysis of three particular films within Shinoda Masahiro's cinematic oeuvre,

asserting this director's identifiable influence over thematic elements and the judicious organization of formal expression in order to serve his stated philosophical and artistic aims. This is not by any means intended to suggest that Shinoda maintained dictatorial control over production, but rather that intelligent selection of creative collaborators permitted him to achieve clearly defined aesthetic objectives in his work. Shinoda's significant body of commentary on his films unequivocally credits his frequent collaborations with screenwriters such as Tamioka Taeko and Terayama Shuji, cinematographers such as Kosugi Masao, and set designers such as Awazu Kiyoshi in the successful formation of a distinct tone for each of his creations. Even with a high degree of variance in mood and experimentation in form creating experiential disjuncture between his works in a way not felt in the films of Ōzu or Kurosawa, collaborations such as this remain key to achieving a significant thematic consistency internal to Shinoda's body of work.

Shinoda has stated that the uncharacteristically hands-off approach that Shochiku took to him as of 1962's *Dry Lake* trained him to function in a dual role as an unofficial producer, where gathering the creative power of "the first-rank of Showa personalities" as collaborators became as important as his own directorial presence.[38] Throughout his commentaries, Shinoda seems to take great pride in this ability to select and choose crew members based largely on their ability to articulate his specific directorial vision: "If we suppose that there is something called a Shinoda aesthetic, I think it is that I am at the very least a director who considers how to evaluate a cameraman's talent with a high degree of concern."[39] Shinoda, ever the consummate formalist, in particular credits much of his artistic success to his 35-year series of collaborations with composer Takemitsu Tōru, best known for the atonal and haunting soundtracks to *Woman in the Dunes* (Teshigahara Hiroshi, 1964) and *Kwaidan* (Kobayashi Masaki, 1964), in whose works Shinoda beheld "the tragedies of the age which resonated too within my own creations," and whose radio production of *Shinju ten no amijima* served as direct inspiration for Shinoda's *Double Suicide*.[40] However, the selectiveness with which Shinoda brings in collaborators, the thematic coherency discussed above and the consistent appearance of certain formal motifs

appearing throughout his film career serve as substantive evidence for his primary control over the final result of the films included in the scope of this thesis.

Notes

[1] Akashi Sanjin and Shinoda Masahiro. *Nihon shi kantei*. (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2004), 73. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[2] Masahiro Shinoda takes care throughout his writings to link the particular forms of violence and absolutism that he discusses as emblematic of dominant Japanese culture as originating from the animistic, sun-worshipping Yamatai dynasty. Recorded in 6th century Chinese histories as the first documented dynasty of *Wa* (ancient Japan), the Yamatai were one of many tribes thought to have populated the islands in their prehistory, but their growth as a nation is now traced by some to the dominant Yamato culture of Japan. (Post Wheeler, *The Sacred Scriptures of the Japanese* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), 393–395.) The director's writings touch upon this notion often (See *Yami no naka no ansoku*, 166), and his film *Himiko* (Hyōgensha, 1974) portrays the culture of Yamatai as a direct predecessor to "Yamato Japanese" political and ethnic ideologies encapsulated in the Imperial house.

[3] Okamura Ryo, interview with Shinoda Masahiro, *Jigoku no ue no hanami kana* (Tokyo: Koubunsha, 2003), 64. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[4]The *ningen sengen*, a 1946 Imperial declaration delivered as the New Year's address to the people, served as the Japanese emperor (*tennō*) Hirohito's renunciation of his personal divinity, refuting centuries of cultural propaganda that had found renewed emphasis in the Meiji era. Dower suggests that the self-repudiation of the Emperor's personal godhood was viewed by Hirohito himself as a mere semantic game meant to mollify the Allied command, and that "neither on this occasion, nor later, did the emperor unequivocally repudiate his alleged *descent* from the gods. He could not do so, for his entire universe rested on this mythological genealogy." (John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 314-316) Regardless of the ambivalence of the actual declaration, Shinoda submits that this moment (in addition to the initial trauma of the Empire of Japan's surrender experienced on August 15th, 1945) served for many Japanese as an act of extreme ideological violence against the absolutist visions of Japanese identity projected in large part through the legitimizing lens of an aestheticized Imperial nostalgia.

[5] Okamura, *Jigoku no ue no hanami kana,* 49.

[6] Joan Mellen, "Shinoda Masahiro." In *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 229–253. (New York: Liveright, 1975), 253.

[7] David Phelps. Interview with Shinoda Masahiro. "Bridging the Centuries". Moving Image Source. Nov 1, 2011. http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/bridging-the-centuries-20111101

[8] Much of Shinoda's cinema addresses human relationships as under the constant mediation of constructed linguistic and cultural realities, demonstrating a theoretical accord with Althusser's assertion that humans in society are 'always already interpellated,' or in an inherited and constant state of negotiation with and reaffirmation of our relationships between other individuals and the community at large as the terms of those relations too shifts along with our reception of sensory and cultural input. "You and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects. The writing that I am currently executing and the reading that you are currently performing are also in this

respect rituals of ideological recognition, including the 'obviousness' with which the 'truth' or 'error' of my reflections may impose itself on you." (Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso,1984), 46-47) Shinoda makes his recognition of this state of constant mediation by the suprahuman apparent, stating that "it is difficult for me to imagine a polity removed of the gods" – the director using the term "gods" (as he often does) to refer to any purely ideal construct of a cultural imaginary. (Shinoda, *Yami no naka no ansoku*, 302)

[9] Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 47.

[10]Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," from *Film Theory and Criticism*, 3rd edition, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 692-93.

[11] Audie Bock, *Japanese Film Directors* (New York: Kodansha International, 1978), 342.

[12] Martin Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, 4th ed., (New York: Methuen, 1984), 118.

[13] Shinoda Masahiro became a member of the Ōzu *gumi* (established film crew) after joining Shochiku Ofuna studios in 1953, most notably being credited as assistant director on 1957's *Tokyo Twilight*. In a 1974 interview with Joan Mellen, when asked about the directors that most influenced the visual techniques in his films, the director stated that "Ōzu and Mizoguchi provided the strongest influence," although he emphasized his belief that his films were made visually distinct from his predecessors' through a greater emphasis on eroticism. (Mellen, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 247.)

[14] Yoshida Kiju, *Ozu's Anti-Cinema* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2003), 65.

[15] Shinoda. *Yami no naka no ansoku*. 161.

[16] Ibid. 159.

[17] The state of Japanese cultural development, even into the 21st century, has been noted by theorists for its high emphasis on "a system of meanings and codes that are referencing other texts." (Patrick Galbraith and Jason Karlin, "The Mirror of Idols and Celebrity," *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 1-32. 10.) Galbraith and Karlin go on to posit that cultural works in Japan "are nostalgic texts that link the past to the present through the intertextuality of their image and performance," forming what is in essence "a closed circular system without origin." (Ibid. 12-13).

[18] The pre-war American scholar Daniel Holtom draws attention to the deep rooting of Japanese Imperial power in nostalgia. He highlights an 1870 Imperial rescript which overtly poses that the chaos experienced at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate was due in large part to the historical breakdown of an early Shinto state, leading to long "seasons of decay" in the Middle Ages "where government and education failed to flourish," contrasted with a long-lost Imperial utopia where "government and education were clear to those above, while below them the manners and customs of the people were beautiful." (Daniel Holtom, *Modern Japan and Shinto Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), 6.)

[19] Shinoda Masahiro. *Yami no naka no ansoku: Shinoda Masahiro Hyōronshū* (Tokyo: Fīrumu āto sha, 1979), 305. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[20] The most widely promulgated images of the organicism of Japanese cultural sentiment can be found in 18th century *kokubungaku* scholar Norinaga Motoori's concept of *mono no aware* and 1930s philosopher Kuki Shūzō's concept of *iki*, both of which were generated out of their authors' powerful nationalist sentiments. (See Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003))

[21] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 245.

[22] Within many founding documents of the Meiji polity, the Imperial state was overtly conceived of as a conduit for the virtues of a divine realm, inhabited by the pantheon of *kami* traditionally associated with the Ise shrines, to be transmitted to the people who made up the *kokka*, or "national household." As J.E. Ketelaar writes of the 1868 Charter Oath of the Meiji State: "The Unity of Rite and Rule served as an ideological tool to create, articulate, and manifest an "alliance" (*meiyaku*) extending from the myriad deities (*jingi*) through the figure of the Emperor and the mediation of his ministers, "even unto the least persons unto heaven (*tenka no shomin ni itaru made mo*)." (*Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 89) John Dower uses the propaganda disseminated throughout the military ranks who acted as the primary target for indoctrination to illustrate the ideological emphasis on the spiritual nature of the nation and the accompanying demand for suppression of individual interest: "In *Shinmin no Michi* (The Way of the Subject), a major tract issued four months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the government's ideologues dwelled on the direct descent of the emperor from the sun goddess Amaterasu and characterized the national polity as a theocracy in which "the way of the subject is to be loyal to the Emperor in disregard of self, thereby supporting the Imperial throne coextensive with the Heavens and with the Earth." Filial piety and loyalty were the supreme virtues of the imperial state, and *Shinmin no Michi* was at pains to denounce the "individualism, liberalism, utilitarianism, and materialism" that imperiled those virtues. Emperor Hirohito was sacrosanct. His war was holy. The virtues he embodied were unique and immutable." (Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 277.)

[23] Okamura, *Jigoku no ue no hanami kana*, 252.

[24] Shinoda Masahiro, *Nihongo no goho de toritai* (Tokyo: NHK Books, 1995), 204-5. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[25] Tom Mes, "All Our Yesterdays," Filmcomment, October 2010, 62.

[26] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 253.

[27] Matsuda Iwao, interview with Shinoda, "Eiga wa dokuritsujin e no messēji," *Tsūsan Jānaru* 13-4 (1980), 70-78. 78. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[28] Phelps, "Bridging the Centuries."

[29]Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 245.

[30] I approach the notion of "performativity" through Judith Butler's definition from 1993's "Bodies That Matter": "Here the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law. Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent." (New York: Routledge, 1993, 122)

[31] Ibid. 236.

[32] Shinoda, *Yami no naka no ansoku*, 163-164.

[33] Chuck Stephens, "Loser Take All," from *Pale Flower*, DVD, directed by Shinoda Masahiro. (1963; Tokyo: Criterion, 2011.)

[34] I use the term "Sublime" in the English Romantic sense established by Edmund Burke in 1757's "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful." Specifically, this refers to a phenomenon outside the sensory experience that generates terror through its sheer magnificence and

incomprehensibility, through which a pleasure greater than that possible through one's response to the "beauty" of material objects is achieved.

[35] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 245.

[36] David Phelps. "The Closed World: The Films of Shinoda Masahiro". Senses of Cinema. Issue 61. Dec 19, 2011. (http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articules/the-closed-world-the-films-of-masahiro-shinoda-surface-play-and-subterfuge-in-the-movies-of-a-modern-classicist/)

[37] Shinoda, *Yami no naka no ansoku*, 160.

[38] Interview with Shinoda Masahiro. "Shōwa Ichiketadai no Eizōrōn: Shinoda Masahiro, Yoshida Yoshishige." *Fūkei*, 11(8)-119. (Tokyo: Yuyukai, 8/1970), 77. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[39] Watanabe Yutaka. *Miyagawa Kazuo no sekai: Eizo o horu.* (Tokyo: Herald, 1984.), 152. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[40] Tsutomu Isoda, interview with Shinoda Masahiro, "Shinoda Masahiro, Takemitsu Toru no Oto to Hito o Kataru," *Kinema Junpō* , 5/1/1996, 140. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

CHAPTER II

ASSASSINATION: HISTORICAL OBJECTIFICATION OF THE SUBJECT

> I am not interested in the future or in utopian ideals. I would like to be able to take hold of the past and make it stand still so that I can examine it from different angles.
> -Shinoda Masahiro, 1974[1]

In the early 1960s, the Japanese people continued to grapple with the question of where blame ought to be assigned for the atrocities of the war era, having only the hazy details and conflicting accounts of that dark period with which to reckon. The 1964 *jidaigeki* film *Assassination* (*Ansatsu*; Shochiku)[2] became Shinoda Masahiro's testament to the uncertainty and chaos of the two decades leading up to the defeat of 1945, paradoxically imaged through another long past, violent age of transition whose values had resonated strongly in the militarist culture of the 1930s and 40s. The subject of the film is Kiyokawa Hachirō (played by legendary actor Tamba Tetsurō), a commoner-turned-samurai leader of the revolutionary *shishi*[3] movement during the final days of the Tokugawa shogunate in the mid-19th century. Modern myths surrounding many Restoration luminaries have codified these figures in Japanese historical perception as wholly heroic or villainous, as exemplified by the 2010 NHK miniseries *Ryōmaden*'s treatment of Sakamoto Ryōma, who also appears in *Assassination*.

Although Kiyokawa Hachirō's influence over the political events of the 1860s is undeniable, there has been relatively little interest in this wily revolutionary-cum-poet, outside of a 1930 film and the 1963 Shiba Ryōtarō novella *Kimyō na Hachirō,* from which Shinoda's film is adapted. As the novel and film both reflect, accounts on this man depict him as a heartless and power-hungry schemer as often as an estimable humanist who sought to level the oppressive class system of the Tokugawa Shogunate. It is perhaps the conflicted nature of Kiyokawa Hachirō both as a man and as a historical subject that makes him too problematic to become a truly popular figure in Japanese culture. However, it also makes him the ideal subject candidate through which Shinoda

can demonstrate the unstable and heavily mediated nature of the historical narratives upon which rest the modern conception of the metaphysical values and structure that have come to define Japanese identity.

Through the fragmented and contradictory images of Kiyokawa, at once modern paragon and feudal-age demagogue personified, Shinoda Masahiro is able to question how cultural meaning is constructed in Japan, both in the moment and retroactively through narrative. Simultaneously, *Assassination* seeks to draw direct parallels between the brutal *bakumatsu*[4] era and the upheaval at the end of the Pacific War. Shinoda thus shows how "the sacred symbol of the past [was used to] legitimize the revolutionary changes of the future"[5] in two ages marked by demagoguery's ascendance over respect for human dignity, and asks: Is a revolution possible in a society which revolves around an absolute image of the past?

By employing technical characteristics to stage a formal deconstruction of 20th century Restoration narratives, the filmmaker reveals the continued role of feudal-age tensions in shaping a Japanese "modernity" rationalized through narrative illusions of social progress. In so doing, Shinoda articulates a belief that the "revolutions" of 1868 and 1945 hold parallel meaning for modern audiences in terms of inefficacy to change Japan's power relations, as well of showing the role of violence in objectifying both perpetrator and victim in the eyes of history.

Shinoda Masahiro has said that, in a tonal and psychological sense, *Assassination* is the closest expression of the Japan witnessed in his childhood experiences to be found among all of his films.[6] Shinoda's childhood education at the height of the Pacific War serves to demonstrate why the director might lend such importance to consistent attempts to humanize popular historical figures and apprehend as more than abstracted moral lessons, as witnessed in his treatment of Kiyokawa. Among those idealized as the embodiment of perfect virtue during the Showa era was Kusunoki Masashige, a 14th century samurai who committed *seppuku* after losing a critical battle in the Emperor Go-Daigo's disastrous attempt at restoring Imperial rule. Numerous accounts, often written centuries after the event, claimed that before their ritual suicide

to avoid capture by the Ashikaga shogun's troops Kusunoki and his brother had declared "I should like to be reborn seven times into this world of men, so that I might destroy the enemies of the Court."[7] The attribution of this quote to the Kusunoki brothers ensured that their example of single-minded adherence to an Imperial cause mandated by heaven would survive their mortal bodies. Ivan Morris describes the evolution of Kusunoki as the Emperor's centrality to Japanese identity became increasingly emphasized following a far more successful restorationist venture in 1868:

> Some five-hundred years after his death, [Kusunoki Masashige] was raised to the Junior First Rank… a fantastic promotion for a mere commoner… The new school textbooks honoured Masashige as a loyalist paragon, and his story was impressed on the mind of every young Japanese child as a shining example of patriotic virtue and the Bushidō ethic… The glorification of this obscure warrior from Mount Kongo reached new heights during the ultra-nationalist period, and in the 1930s the state-directed educational system presented him as the worthiest samurai in Nippon's long, hero-studded history.[8]

Kusunoki and other valorized heroes of yesteryear were thus incorporated into popular lore as suprahuman enactors of a specific expressive intent of violence that William Kelly terms "performative obligation, which [in Japan] has proved to be a durable idiom of social conduct."[9] In schools, these figures modeled for young people the ultimate act of loyalty through a willingness to not only kill, but to take one's own life in symbolic offering to the transcendent concept of Japanese identity embodied in the Emperor. The ideal of Kusunoki, divorced from any sense of human weakness in his resolve to die for the sake of the nation, was to be not only admired, but embodied. This affected Shinoda directly in the form of his mandatory *seppuku* training as a student at Gifu Daini Junior High School in 1944. He recounts this experience in graphic detail in several of his writings:

> We were instructed that modern warfare meant that not only were soldiers fighting, but the entire nation was united in a total war. They preached to us, "All of you are the glorious children of his Imperial Majesty." Imperial children must not be captured by the enemy. Before accepting the shame of capture, you must manfully cut open your belly, they ordered those of us in the military academy attached to the junior high school. Gathering all of us in the lecture hall, they proceeded to instruct us in *seppuku* method.[10]

To consider either the Emperor or his idealized followers in terms of their base humanity or historical/political circumstances obviously challenged the absolute virtue attributed to them, and so was heavily discouraged. In another anecdote, Shinoda vividly recalls asking a junior high school history teacher how Kusunoki's sacrifice for a single unbroken line of Imperial descent could be claimed given the existence of two rival courts during the Nanboku-chō Period. Wouldn't the hero have had to be a traitor to one emperor to fight for the other? And what made the victorious Southern Court the "true" line outside of the fact that they had won? The future director soon found himself being struck violently by his instructor and accused of disrespect to the *tenno heika*. "I remember reflecting afterwards on this experience, thinking how strange this contrivance was that, rather than just being a political figure or statesman, our emperor had come to be preserved as an infallible and absolute god (*zettaiteki na kami*)."[11] It is in address to this dissatisfaction, felt by a young man at the height of a losing war, that the same man grown would stage a direct challenge on celluloid to the dehumanized images of the emperor and his loyalists. In recognition of this biographical context, we now turn to the film itself.

Assassination is without a doubt the most stylistically and structurally radical of Shinoda's films made at Shochiku. Shinoda's normally measured and slow-going camera is here often found whirling and diving around the room, heightening the drama and our confusion over the details. The building blocks of the plot are given to us via the unordered, second-and-third hand accounts through which we learn of the events upon which the maddeningly contradictory legend of Kiyokawa Hachirō is built. Expressive, low-key lighting that slices through oppressive shadows and the harsh linear patterns highlighted in the busy images of Japanese architecture serve to both enhance the sense of drama and visually hem in Shinoda's subjects into spaces of relevance to an insistent portrayal of historical process.

The disruption of false objectivity sought by Shinoda in this film is not merely limited to that espoused through dominant cultural beliefs. The filmmaker puts equal effort into undercutting the

all-seeing-eye of the camera, consciously dismantling the “absolutist” perspective which he asserts that Ōzu, Kurosawa, and other golden age auteurs promulgate through their committed employment of a particular formal vision. “If we put forth a defined view via a method that establishes only one camera placement as the fixed point of observation, doesn't that identify us with the value system of the "eternal" and the "absolute"? Ōzu Yasujirō as a person strives for a fundamental truth, and I truly think that the Japan his films have made in order to manifest that fundamental truth is that of only one filmmaker.”[12]

With this belief, Shinoda appears to construct *Assassination* in large part as an experiment, challenging himself to disrupt the mystification of directorial command over perspective without smothering the drama at the film’s core. Thus, even as Shinoda puts defiant formal emphasis on indicating the plurality and contradiction that is often hidden behind politically-motivated representations of cultural pasts, he must also indicate himself as complicit in altering the meaning of the events depicted to suit his own ends - benign though this act may be. Seeking to avoid the insincere presentation of an infallible worldview, this director puts his convictions to the test and refuses to provide the viewer with a perspective whose authority is not consistently undercut over its 104-minute run.

Evidencing Shinoda’s directorial posture from the start, *Assassination* begins with a title sequence that serves to visually deconstruct the panoptic illusion through which we apprehend hopelessly convoluted processes of historical development. A male narrator, with portent and authority, describes at length the convoluted circumstances surrounding this ostensible biopic, and thus embeds in the audience expectations of an objectively presented elaboration on a known historical figure. The details come at such speed and in such quantity that, save for the most focused viewer, how these factoids are relevant to Kiyokawa’s tale is difficult to determine. “The effect of the complex prologue is less expository than it is evocative. What information the audience does receive is subsumed by the disassociative impact of Shinoda’s graphic scheme,” asserts Alain Silver.[13] While Silver is speaking generally of this employment of initial bursts of

narration and image, taken to yet further levels in his following film, 1965's *Samurai Spy* (*Ibun Sarutobi Sasuke*), the same tactic is clearly being employed in *Assassination* to contextualize the era in terms of a grim tone that perhaps mirrors the wartime experience.

The title card then cuts into an easily identifiable early modern period map of Edo, the broad lines of waterways and district borders organizing the city into comprehensible patterns structured around the massive crest of the Tokugawa which marks the Shogun's castle. (Figure 2.1) As the credits roll, the camera proceeds in a slow zoom towards the map, pressing in on and clarifying the details of the chaotic gridwork of neighborhoods that immediately surrounds the keep. The gradual elaboration on fine, complex detail parallels the film's structure, hinting that apprehending both Kiyokawa the man and the circumstances of his inevitable death is a far more convoluted task than might be expected. (Figure 2.2) Furthermore, the decentering of the Tokugawa crest that at first dominates the map puts the lie to the common implication of official histories that the outcome of events can be explained through the lens of dominant political interests. For as we shall see, the conclusion of Kiyokawa's story is as much determined by his self-contradicting human weaknesses as the political ideals he holds in regards to the Shogun and Emperor. Just as the hollyhock crest remains in view, it cannot be discounted in its impact on our subject, but a man's life does not orbit this dominant power alone.

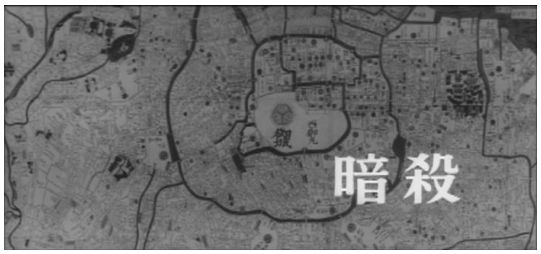

Figure 2.1. The "big picture" of 1860s Edo.

Figure 2.2. Details revealed, power decentered.

Shinoda introduces as our lens into this swiftly collapsing feudal era the man who is to eventually become Kiyokawa's assassin, Sasaki Tadasaburō (Kimura Isao). (Figure 2.3) Sasaki's experience is established as the central frame of the story, as he is assigned by one of the ministers of the Tokugawa shogunate to "know Kiyokawa as a human (*Kiyokawa Hachirō to iu*

ningen o shiru koto da)", after the slippery *rōnin* renounces his ties to the *shishi* and suspiciously offers his services to the regime he once fought to bring down. The well-groomed and practical Sasaki appears to offer the viewer a trustworthy viewpoint as he begins to investigate, and yet Shinoda does away with his objectivity in short, brutal order. Sasaki, a master swordsman who holds an instructorship at a *dōjō*, encounters Kiyokawa outside his practice hall one day, and in true samurai fashion, challenges the inscrutable demagogue to a mock duel before the eyes of the entire school. We are led to believe that this is in order for Sasaki to gauge his subject's temperament for the eventuality of being called on to kill him. However, when the duel begins, Sasaki finds himself unable to read Kiyokawa's impassive face, and within seconds Sasaki has *twice* been thrashed, lying disheveled and bloody on the wooden floor.

In a very rare move within Shinoda's filmography, the aftermath is captured in a handheld point-of-view shot from the perspective of Sasaki. Sasaki's camera "eye" whip-panning around to find the entire body of students leveling the same impassive gaze down upon on his shame, before resting on Kiyokawa's back as he wordlessly recedes out of focus into the darkness. Shinoda makes Sasaki's perception of Kiyokawa in this moment unambiguous, his sleeve ties marking him as a target with a large white "X" that stands out as the frame comes into focus. (Figure 2.4) From this point on, what characterizes Sasaki's investigation is less the passionless fulfillment of duty than a frustrated desire for revenge, complicated by an increasing depth of understanding for his target as a complex human being. A counterpoint of secondary perspective is granted to us in the form of Kiyokawa's trusted retainer Ishizaka Juzō (Hayakawa Tamotsu). The young samurai Ishizaka has begun to fear that his master's boldly proclaimed devotion to the *sonnō jōi* cause has merely been in service of Machiavellian power-plays, compelling him to seek answers in much the same way as Sasaki. Thus, Shinoda provides us with two lenses onto the subject of Kiyokawa, and although they differ in that one is determined to find a reason to condemn and the other is seeking to justify, both find themselves in the same position, vexed by the contradictory images of the man.

Figure 2.3. Sasaki Tadasaburo, consummate *bushi*

Figure 2.4. Sasaki's POV: Kiyokawa as target.

The impossible task to which both Sasaki and Ishizaka have set themselves is to locate the essence of Kiyokawa firmly within clear, Manichean moral dichotomies. Is this man an Imperial restorationist or a Tokugawa loyalist? In one moment, he seems to unquestionably confirm his new loyalty to the *bakufu* by slaying several men who were once his closest *shishi* comrades, and in the next he craftily uses Imperial edicts to hijack a mercenary army paid for by the Shogun's councilors for the Restorationist cause. Is Kiyokawa, then, a humanist paragon or a power hungry demagogue? When a haughty *daimyō* at a dinner party calls him out for being an upstart peasant lucky enough to acquire a fine sword, he verbally strikes back against the elitist slander, pronouncing that "It is not the quality of the sword that allows a man to achieve success. It's the quality of the man." However, we also see him consistently sneering at the "rats and dogs" that make up the fellow disgraced samurai who join him, boasting to Sakamoto Ryoma: "I have the *rōnin* under my thumb. Nothing is more fun than giving others orders."

Is he a heartless and bloodthirsty killer, then, or a sensitive martyr? Kiyokawa beheads a Tokugawa magistrate, Kihachi, in the street simply for ridiculing him, and allows a seemingly unnecessary bloodbath by putting *shishi* in position where they will be killed by loyalists from their own fief. Worse still, he abandons his mistress Oren (Iwashita Shima) to be tortured to death by the Shogunate. On the other hand, we later see that Kiyokawa is truly shaken over Kihachi (who, it is revealed, was in truth his very first kill) and that he feels inconsolable grief and guilt over Oren's death. This last loss is suggested to be the one sacrifice from which he never truly recovers, for we see as one of Kiyokawa's final acts a drunken fling with a prostitute who he insists on calling by the name of his lost love.

The struggle to define Kiyokawa by his actions is further complicated by the fact that what information Sasaki/Ishizaka learn about the man is fragmentary and unordered in a temporal sense. This serves to complicate any truths the samurai and the viewer might hope to glean from a clear understanding of cause and effect. As Mellen writes of the film, "Shinoda deliberately avoids a linear, chronological approach that would tell the audience who is who and where the action leads. But neither are the principals themselves certain of their next move. Style and substance conjoin."[14]As difficult as it must be for the two men to structure this subject's life in their heads, it is doubly challenging for us as viewer, as we must further orient ourselves around the shifting point of perspectives of these two men in addition to those whose stories they are collecting. Along with the dynamic camera placements that render the perspective within a scene unpredictable, Shinoda's structural tactic trains the viewer to expect nothing, to embrace uncertainty and respond with a skeptical eye to organicized convention, whether narrative or formal.

The film features two separate editing patterns that mediate the viewer's reception of Kiyokawa's elusiveness. The first pertains to the central timeframe in which Sasaki and Ishizaka investigate Kiyokawa's background, and the other to the flashbacks as we receive the tales of others through their witness. In the former, tone is set through a disjointed editing pattern that often begins with the viewer dropped into the scene with a close-up to medium establishing shot that prevents a more comprehensive reception of the diegetic space.

Following this, each cut establishes perspective from a unique camera placement within the environment, with little to no concern for visual conventions against jump cuts, breaking the 180 degree line, or graphically matching one character with another so that it becomes difficult to distinguish between subjects. (Figure 2.5) Obstacles are often present, disrupting the line of sight between the viewer's gaze and the subject of the scene, leaving the origin of dialogue or the clear development of actions in doubt. This intense stylization by Shinoda and his long-time cinematographic collaborator Kosugi Masao seems designed to permit us to behold physical

space from as many perspectives as is possible, while still never granting us the illusion of full command over the historical moment. Shinoda writes: "As projections from two points may cross at a certain point, a film which has more than two points of view can focus on an image, or allow an image to come into focus."[15] The *nouvelle vague* experimentation of *Assassination* occurs not merely to defy convention, but is deliberately employed to suggest innumerable "histories", each a distorted lens in isolation, but which can be layered over another to project Kiyokawa and the *bakumatsu* in greater (but never, ever perfect) clarity.

The flashback sequences, on the other hand, are captured in longer takes, with Kiyokawa followed by tracking shot as he often narrates his strategy and motivations to the witness who will later testify to Sasaki or Ishizaka. (Figure 2.6) The composition remains more traditionally coherent in these sequences, more respectful of the 180-degree line, and edited in a manner that provides greater temporal coherence. Unlike scenes taking place in the primary level of diegesis inhabited by Sasaki and Ishizaka, we are given context and a clear progression of cause and effect, as befits these stories designed to portray Kiyokawa as a particular narrative archetype of samurai. It is also in these scenes where we receive the freeze-frames that capture a definitive image of Kiyokawa; whether it be our elusive protagonist's defiant glance at a drunken, scornful *daimyo*, Kihachi's disembodied head, or the contorted face of Oren as Kiyokawa has sex with her for the first time. (Figures 2.7, 2.8) All of the moments listed above are captured at the end of their respective scenes, the flow of cinematic time ceasing for a few brief seconds in order to reinforce these moments as crystallizations of Kiyokawa's essence – at least in the minds of our secondary witnesses Sasaki and Ishizaka.

Figure 2.5. One early sequence in the central, non-flashback storyline of *Assassination*. The edits are relatively short (all less than 10sec) and camera repositioning following edits quite dynamic.

Figure 2.6. A flashback sequence as Sakamoto Ryoma (Sada Keiji) narrates an unsettling encounter with Kiyokawa (Tamba Tetsuro) to Ishizaka, a young *shishi*. The two-minute and ten-second scene is composed of a single long take, capturing Sakamoto's memory from a crane shot.


Figures 2.7 (L) and 2.8 (R). – Frozen in time: the moments that define a man's life?

Veteran editor Walter Murch proposed that cinematic cuts parallel human cognition, a judicious edit implying that an idea presented by the story has been entertained, and is about to be contextualized by separation and punctuation from the next idea to follow.[16] Based on this notion, the two differing structures of cut patterns and shot juxtaposition in *Assassination* can be understood to accent the differing levels of mediation through which we understand Kiyokawa Hachiro. The experience of Sasaki and Ishizaka, our two primary lenses into Kiyokawa's world, is marked by near-constant uncertainty, a torrent of conflicting ideas reflected in fluctuations in editing and camera positioning. Meanwhile, the deceptive sense of order granted through mediated retellings of events is formally suggested by imbuing our apprehension of Kiyokawa at moments where Sasaki/Ishizaka are receiving second-hand formation with a focus and solid positioning which insists on its own objectivity. We are therefore shown that the confident clarity of narrative, never unbiased, is a function of refinement through repeated representation.

The means of cinematic representation are indicated in another manner through Shinoda's concerted foregrounding of light, undoubtedly the most crucial element of primary control over the composition of the film image. In *Assassination*, both the expansive interiors of temples and warehouses and the labyrinthine alleys of Kyoto exterior scenes are bathed in inky blackness, save for a few emphatically brilliant spots of light that draw the eye to the subject. In nearly every scene of the film, Shinoda places priority on highlighting the source of light that permits our view, even as critical dialogue is being introduced just off-screen. (Figure 2.9) Thus, the narrative of the film is de-emphasized, with Shinoda shifting his camera away from the development of the convoluted plot to focus our attention on the *andon* lanterns and candles. It is quite literally *how*

light is being shed on the darkness of Japan's past that interests Shinoda, equally as much so as what is being lit. Although in many instances we enter the scene with luminosity already in place, in one notable instance, Shinoda playfully suggests bias by having the only witness to a key moment light the sole lantern that permits a view of the scene – presenting a diegetic agent's influence over the light that allows us to receive the unfolding tragedy of Kiyokawa. (Figure 2.10)

Figure 2.9. Lighting established.


Figure 2.10. Shedding light on Kiyokawa.

The other purpose of so deliberately establishing in our mind a recognition of what elements are lighting the scene is that, in many cases, the light quality that is ostensibly emergent from these pre-modern is clearly too hard, brilliant and directed to be that of the visibly soft light of candles, lanterns or moonlight. This is key because it functions on two levels of presentation, revealing the bias of the diegetic narrators in addition to serving as an admission of modern technology and the presence of the director in mediating the story. The incompatibility between source and its illuminative power certainly serves as metaphor within the narrative, with the hazy softness that comes with a single perspective on a complex situation dismissed by the teller in favor of insisting one's own position as clear, defined (and ultimately artificial) objectivity. And yet the mechanical quality of the lights demands that we as viewers recognize yet one further level of presentational effect, as the presence of the modern is betrayed in Shinoda's juxtaposition of the natural and manmade, undercutting his own organic, godlike authority as auteur. Thus, a bifurcated plot structure actually is made to reflect *three* separate levels of mediation through which we experience the story.

Despite the occasional struggle to keep up with the sheer flood of narrative development and perspectival input in this rather lean film, there remains an organizational sense to it so that Kiyokawa and Sasaki's emotional journeys are not lost on the viewer. In large part, the emotional impact arises from the complementary application of accents in both Shinoda's signature use of freeze-frame techniques and the alternation of uncanny silence and unharmonious *shakuhachi* and *shamisen* notes in Takemitsu's soundtrack. David Phelps writes: "These distantiation techniques only make the scene more immediate, more visceral: the viewer projects himself into the scene by rhythm alone."[17] This is indicative of what I read as Shinoda's attempt to resolve, in some small degree, the fundamental tension within literary metanarratives that makes them both key to common understanding and an endless means of exploitation. Without the ability to hold an audience rapt with emotional power, narrative has no hope of expressing greater meaning as art, but the origin of even "historically-based" works as the manipulation of fiction must be recognized and questioned.

As in both *Double Suicide* and *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees*, *Assassination* implicates artistic sentiment as a primary source through which historical images of the pious embrace of organic cultural values are promulgated to reinforce contemporary power structures. Shinoda's reference to this role of aesthetic tradition in rationalizing political morality is accomplished in *Assassination* through *waka* poetry. This is illustrated at the moment of Kiyokawa's greatest triumph, following his successful double-cross of the Shogunate at the start of the final act.

At this point in the story, Kiyokawa's *sonno jōi* convictions and ruthless strategy has resulted in a whirlwind of violence and betrayal, with him at the center. The love of his life, Oren, is dead at the hands of his enemies. In order to keep up his ruse, he has in cold blood cut down an idealistic teenage samurai who had sworn an oath of brotherhood to Kiyokawa after the *shishi* leader had earlier saved his life. Now, Kiyokawa has gathered his lieutenants at a teahouse to celebrate the victory bought with this blood, and he casually shrugs off the expected, blustery resignation of several *ronin* who feel mistrust over his inscrutable loyalties. However, he then

receives an anguished letter by his earnest right-hand man Ishizaka which severs their ties, reading: "I feel like I don't know who you are." Although Kiyokawa's face remains impassive, Shinoda's camera pauses on his expression long enough to signify that this is a meaningful abandonment, another loss compounding the death of Oren and his murder of a naive boy. When asked about the letter by an offscreen voice, Kiyokawa's first reaction is to seize a blank fan and compose a *waka*, which he then hands off to a nearby subordinate with a confident smirk and the line "Not a bad poem, eh? (*yoi shi darō*)" (Figure 2.11) The subordinate, in awe, reads aloud Kiyokawa's words:

The way opens and opens again	*Saki akete mata saki akeru*
On a journey to death	*Shi e no tabi*
I shall not be lost	*Mayoi wa semaji*
On the Imperial path	*Sumeragi no michi*

Filled with awe and joy at this magnificent composition, the retainers before Kiyokawa begin an impromptu recitation that within a single verse develops into a melodious chorus. All voices in the room ecstatically sing Kiyokawa's words in perfect concert as if it were drawn from the classical canon itself, rather than an impromptu creation by a living man sitting before them. Meanwhile, the man of the hour now turns his back on his celebrating guests to gaze out the window, the constant voyeur Sasaki watching as Kiyokawa solemnly drops the painful reminder of Ishizaka's condemnation down to the muddy street. (Figure 2.12)

Figure 2.11. "Sensei has composed a poem!"

Figure 2.12. No joy in victory.

Kiyokawa's composition here highlights many of the values of servitude and glorification of death conflated with the early modern conception of the samurai, and in infusing those sentiments

in his poem Kiyokawa is positioning himself as a paragon of traditional virtue in a highly self-aware manner. The choice of *waka* as a mode of expression serves as a formal nod to this. It is in direct acknowledgement and *because* of the origins of poetic convention in the cultural authority of the Imperial court that *waka* became valued by *bushi* of the Edo period as a signifier of a well-cultivated and righteous mind. Implicit in this definition of culture that the early modern samurai strived to embody was an ineffable conception of pure ethnic and spiritual identity, upon which Kiyokawa's *jōi* movement was founded. Burns elaborates on influential late Tokugawa *kokugaku* scholar Motoori Norinaga's assertion of *waka* poetry as the fullest expression of the *mono no aware* pathos that confirmed this essential Japanese identity:

> For Norinaga both *mono no aware* and the "pure mind" demarcated a realm of experience that was specifically "Japanese" in nature. This designation of their Japaneseness was accomplished by two analytical sleights of hand. First, Norinaga argued that the translation of the "private" experience of *mono no aware* into poetic form and poetic language in effect generalized it, so that the poem becomes a primordial Japanese voice. This claim rests on Norinaga's assertion that the conventional form of Japanese poetry, the alternation of lines of five and seven syllables, "naturally" expresses the innate and special character of the Japanese language and also of those who speak it. Secondly, Norinaga asserted that an essential difference separated this realm of experience from that ordered by other, alien modes of perception. As Norinaga would have it, Chinese poetry, history, and thought reduced experience to a set of objectified, "rational" principles that distorted the mode of perception called *mono no aware*.[18]

On this basis, Kiyokawa's *waka* thus can be read as a further indication of this man's self-representation of his interiority as sympathetic with the "primordial Japanese voice," a deliberate submission of himself as private human subject to the public expression of himself as a historical object. In support of his self-objectification, the poem summons up imagery of the organic basis for *bushidō* culture as our protagonist's aspiration. Asking to have the way opened for "a journey to death" establishes masochistic violence valorized as the *raison d'etre* of the samurai; a noble death, not victory or accomplishment, is the ultimate object of the journey of the one who serves.[19]

This journey to death in Kiyokawa's poetic metaphor is accomplished by travel on the path of the *sumeragi*, an honorific for the Emperor. Guided by the road set forth by the eternal monarchy, there is no straying from the path to the doom through which his life is legitimated, the distractions and pain of this world going unnoticed as he focuses his all on service to the epitome of Japanese spirit. The core argument of Kiyokawa's poem is that a virtuous man does not follow his reason or emotion as an individual, for the path to authentic fulfillment leads to a fated and desirable end that has already been laid out before him by a primordial spirit of the kind posited by Motoori. This is what Shinoda means when he equates Japanese absolutism with the ideology of death, and what he believes still informs Japanese thought decades after the war.[20]

The use of convention in the arts as a device of obfuscation rather than a document of the true emotional content of a historical figure's character is made clear in this film through Kiyokawa's use of the above *waka* to consciously construct the image of the inhumanly resolute *sonno jōi* demagogue that he wishes to present to history. And yet, in the context of the glimmers of doubt about Kiyokawa's resolve which Shinoda grants us, the context of the poem makes the pain that this man has brought upon himself and others in maintaining this image all the more tragic. What is shown is a fractured identity, wracked by human frailty, that problematizes any purportedly objective notions history may have about Kiyokawa Hachiro as an uncompromising and single-minded Imperialist.

Both the content of the poem and the ideological structure of *waka* as articulated by Motoori emphasize imagery of an organic ideal known through "natural" feelings of sacrificial loyalty which can only be distorted by "rational principles". And yet, our witness of Kiyokawa as more than a samurai, but a man who has suffered great loss, shows the central flaw of the *kokubungaku* proposition. What is more natural than feeling grief at loss? What is the rejection of doubt but a byproduct of rationalization? By juxtaposing Kiyokawa as the perfect image of the resolute warrior-poet with a deeply melancholy image of this same man in the midst of crisis and self-doubt moments later, it is made clear that an invalidation of Motoori's absolute image of the

organicism of Japanese identity is exactly what Shinoda intends to accomplish in *Assassination.* For Shinoda, glorification of a man like Kiyokawa in this fashion commits the great crime of politicizing human life, reducing the terms of its value to a single facet: the degree to which it had served to support or harm the structures of power. Thus, to reveal such plurality within the life experience of great men is a necessary revolutionary act, to impress upon the audiences that men possessing moral flaws and free will, not untouchable icons of virtue, are what have guided society to its current manifestation.

Given Kiyokawa's dissolution into the nihilistic hedonism of prostitutes and drink following this scene, it is hard to read this poem as anything but a feint, Kiyokawa's attempt to mislead those around him (and perhaps himself) into believing a false image of single-minded loyalty. Kiyokawa may, as far as his men know, have managed to embody the image of the uncompromising and proud Imperialist, but he *has* lost his way in a fashion much more painful to him as an individual. He has sacrificed both Oren and Ishizaka to a quest for perfect ideological fulfillment and power which had begun as a humanist struggle against the unforgiving structures of Tokugawa society.

Worse yet, as the voices around him sing praise to the *sumeragi*, Kiyokawa realizes that by latching on to a perfect transcendent image of Imperial rule as the political ideal, he has completely failed to not only better the lives around him, but create any sociopolitical change of value. This, Shinoda finds, is the fundamental historical problem of Japanese politics expressed in the experience of a single, frustrated idealist: "For the Japanese, a revolution must create the eternal and the unchanging, a kind of utopia… But this world is so changing. When a revolutionary seeks an eternal world, he is no longer in the dimension of a political revolution."[21]

Joan Mellen, taking interest in the set design of the film, finds a "sense of irony" expressed in the architectural monuments to a political structure that refuses to acknowledge that it is in its death throes:

> The hard, geometric lines of the Edo architecture (Shinoda filmed *Assassination* in actual eighteenth-century buildings) suggest stability and permanence, even as Tokugawa power will survive for only five more years.[22]

If Mellen is suggesting a straightforward irony present in the looming end of Tokugawa rule amidst such monolithic infrastructure, then there is a fundamental misreading of Shinoda's intent here. Shinoda has stated that power politics of the sort at the core of *Assassination* are "empty" in their ability to effect change[23] and that the age of democracy has simply provided a different stage for the ideology of death to be enacted.[24] It is clear that Shinoda is suggesting in a very non-ironic manner through the image of the sturdy structures that their continued physical existence in the postwar era parallels the enduring nature of other structures. As Tom Mes notes, a secondary effect of much of *Assassination*'s disjointed structure and formal design is intended to "blur the distinction between the old power and the new; whether it be militarist or imperial rule, there is no real change."[25]

Shinoda clearly articulates this notion by expressing Kiyokawa's failure to meaningfully restructure society through a particularly trenchant image in a scene leading up to the film's denouement. We follow a Shogunate official in a rail-shot as he wanders through the strolling garden at his mansion, still wearing the *chonmage* topknot required by Edo-period law but dressed in a Napoleonic-era French military uniform, complete with medals and epaulets of rank. (Figure 2.13) Encapsulated in this depiction of the Japanese power structure is a suggestion that the centers of power are justifiably confident in their ability to weather a superficial "revolution" in which little practical change to the cultural logic which generates and legitimizes feudal institutions can be expected. Shinoda sees this as an overt reality in Japan's present: "In whichever nation we speak of, the history and relationship between people and country (*kokka*) is symbolized in the flag. The sun image borne within Japan's *hinomaru* again re-inscribes the animism of ancient society in the present."[26] Unlike contemporary films such as Kobayashi's *Hara-kiri* (1963) which mock the hubris of a social order that fails to recognize that the bells of modernity are tolling its doom, *Assassination* instead speaks to the illusion of progress, in

recognition of the force of ideological inertia that carries with it Japan's Imperialist past into the present.

Perhaps Shinoda's most jarring reminder of the subjective nature of all expression occurs at the moment when, in the final minutes of the film, his camera completely shatters the barrier between a deceitful presentation of an objective position external to the story and the irrefutable existence of the subjective which he has suggested both stylistically and structurally throughout the film. In a rare point-of-view shot, Kosugi's camera suddenly leaps to street level, swaying back and forth in a handheld shot meant to represent the alleys of the capital from the perspective of an unknown observer. Suddenly, the camera itself has been brought into the realm of the diegetic; rather than occupying the pretense that it has no role in the construction of Kiyokawa's myth, Shinoda's lens is now metaphorically implicated in the reality of this film and is thereby revealed as a subject itself. If the suggestion of a parallel complicity in constructing narrative between receiver and subject was in doubt, it is no longer, as a familiar Tokugawa retainer approaches and breathlessly addresses the audience directly as Sasaki. (Figure 2.14) As we should recall, this shot, rare for Shinoda, has been applied to Sasaki's perspective before, amidst the heightened emotion of his defeat at Kiyokawa's hands at his *dojo*.

Figure 2.13. Feudal power in transition.

Figure 2.14. Sasaki's loss of perspective.

Although Shinoda's formal trickery has led us to somewhat sympathize with Sasaki out of a common vexation over Kiyokawa's true motives, it is an unsettling rather than reassuring experience to be thrust inside this man's head, to see with his eyes – to be exposed to his subjectivity in such an unnatural manner. It paradoxically serves to give us a lesser knowledge of this man's emotional state, since we are not permitted to see his expression or other visual clues

from his appearance. It must be remembered that for the majority of the central narrative where Sasaki has been commissioned to act in the position of observer, reality has been represented in a disjointed, multifaceted manner, in contrast with the more coherent secondhand narratives of the flashbacks. This new shot serves as another means by which Shinoda subverts the reliability of a camera's replication of subject-position. This formal implication is employed by the director to correlate a violent resolve as experienced by Sasaki with the limited perspective that now arrests us as viewers.

The point-of-view perspective casts such depictions of complexity aside as Sasaki wills himself to abandon his doubts about the justice of killing Kiyokawa. Regardless of his will for revenge, Sasaki has witnessed his target as a man of talent unfairly scorned, devoted to his same ideals of *bushidō* and the Imperial Majesty and who has unambiguously sacrificed much for his ideals. Yet now, as a series of jump-cuts to different events shows, Sasaki's vision has become limited to only that which will allow him to complete his duty – the opportunity represented in Kiyokawa's drunken dissolution in his grief over Oren, and a motive within images of the threat Kiyokawa poses to the Shogunate through his political wherewithal. Shinoda's formal metaphor removes the plurality that has until now characterized Sasaki's story and correlates his vision with the interest of the Tokugawa power structure which he serves. Even as the viewer subjectively occupies Sasaki, he is preparing to occupy the objectified position of *assassin*; a man who renders himself capable of violence by figuratively sacrificing a complex perspective to align with a totalizing conception of political necessity.

It is only at the moment when Sasaki's blade is let loose upon the drunk and vulnerable Kiyokawa that Shinoda releases us from this man's tunnel vision. The slow motion through which the following sequence is captured introduces an element of formal manipulation to Sasaki's depiction that we have not seen before. Until this sequence, we have depended on this man mainly as a subject, a point of inquiry into the circumstances of Kiyokawa. Now, the fulfillment of his recorded historical role heralds his transformation into an object whose

apprehension can no longer be colored by the judgment of history, embodied here in the camera lens. Thus does Shinoda engage with the problem of claims of historical truth: the subject is never not also a mediated object himself, and thus all claims of objective fact are suspect. It is in failing to recognize this that we accept simplistic, absolute conceptions of our past that can be controlled and employed by institutions for the purposes of exploitation.

Through his performative act of violence the assassin has denied himself subjective perspective and its attending conflicts of conscience, allowing Sasaki to suppress his recognition of Kiyokawa's sympathetic humanity and admirable nobility, which might otherwise prevent him from carrying out his distasteful task. The pleasurable, sadistic release of the moment when Sasaki strikes Kiyokawa down, not as a human being but as a threat to his ideological coherence, is acknowledged by Shinoda in the rapid cut to Iwao's blood-splashed face, over which a vacant, oddly satisfied smile appears in slow motion. (Figure 2.15) Shinoda speaks of this assassin's resolve and visceral pleasure as the madness (*kyōki*) of the absolutist mind, which he also recognizes both in Yamaguchi Otoya, the young ultranationalist who murdered Japan Socialist Party leader Asanuma Inejirō on live TV in 1960, and in his own self as a young "true believer" who would have died for the Emperor.[27] Sasaki is now able to kill Kiyokawa because he has recognized in him a new insecurity that makes him vulnerable, a hesitation born of a moral crisis which had not yet had time to ripen in the resolute Imperialist who fought Sasaki at the dojo. (Figure 2.16) What this scene primarily indicates is that although the convictions of the absolutist mind may grant power of a kind, its victories are empty aside from a venting of sadomasochistic tension. Even with his task complete and vengeance satisfied, Sasaki remains a foot soldier in a losing cause, known to history only as a murderer.

Figure 2.15. Sasaki as historical object.

Figure 2.16. Kiyokawa undone by self-doubt.

This film functions in a particularly important way within Shinoda's filmography, in that it consciously seeks to show that human subjects, deserving of dignity as such despite their flaws, are encouraged to be relentlessly (mis)understood as objects of ideological utility to a power structure that must be set apart from the suggestion of their personal desires. From the Meiji period on into Japan's war era, this absolute objectification in service to the spiritual community of the *kokka* was beheld not only in images of Kusunoki, but also in the Imperial house. Whether or not the Emperor is actually believed to be a god or the medium to an extant divine realm is insignificant – whether in nationalism, Marxism, or capitalism, the Japanese cultural system has ensured that images of the absolute continue to be exploited for reactionary political gain, even within a largely secular postwar age.[28] To paraphrase Shinoda: in our age of science, drama has replaced religion in terms of narrative effect on politics.[29]

The narratives created through art function in a manner just as compelling as the mythologies of the ancients in framing our views on the dignity of the human subject and its relationship to the well-being of society as a whole. Even if the gods have disappeared as omniscient guides overseeing a now-"rational" modernity, notions of transcendence are still put forth in the stories we tell each other, as if they were unquestionable fact. And yet in chasing them, as Kiyokawa chases the seductive power granted by wielding the Imperial image, we are liable to lose sight of how to render real positive change into the world.

As I will discuss further in the following chapter's analysis of 1969's *Double Suicide*, *Assassination* demonstrates Shinoda's characteristic efforts to disrupt Euro-American representational modes, an aesthetic ideology impressed upon Japan through the importation of

Hollywood realism as the early model for the cinematic craft. To quote Burch, the potential advantage of carrying over a presentational posture to this new dramatic format was stymied by the "effects of Western attitudes defining the cinema as more 'realistic' than the stage," realism being phrased as a superior dramatic virtue which, it was thought, could only be marred by the recognition of craft at play.[30] To quote Barthes, the realism of Euro-American traditions which is in truth "nothing but theater, but a theater ashamed of itself," unwilling to admit that its propositions are founded in the imaginary and not capturing the truth of an objective reality.[31] Believing that "the camera eye, the perception of the twentieth century, is the most doubtful," [32] this illusory documentary "realism" is precisely what Shinoda takes a stand against through his consistent formal inclusion of the means of production alongside the product in *Assassination* onwards. The absolutist conceit of conventional narrative filmmaking paints a false sheen of documentary authenticity over constructed images, and acts as violent manipulation of another's perception. For Shinoda, this ought to be countered with the more benign violence of the alienating act, revealing a human face behind the narrative often effaced by the assertion of a "universal" film language by Euro-American cinematic convention.

In Shinoda's vision, no man who has lived can be, or should be, the empty, objectified ideal that a politicized sense of history requires them to be to preserve its cultural metanarratives. As Kiyokawa says to Sakamoto Ryōma, perhaps the figure in this film who is most revered in modern Japan: "Take a bath. You stink." While there is no harm in admiring figures like Ryōma and Kiyokawa for their convictions, Shinoda poses that if we in the 21st century fail to sense the odor of their human interiority, we render their revolutionary efforts meaningless by reviving the same absolutist elitism which they sought to destroy in the feudal order. Thus, *Assassination* challenges conventions of structure and the effacement of the creative presence to demystify both the presentational craft and the historical record to bring both back into a human realm to be confronted and grasped in all its contradiction and complexity.

Notes

[1] Bock, *Japanese Film Directors*, 341.

[2] *Assassination*, DVD, directed by Shinoda Masahiro (1964; London: Eureka, 2006). Dialogue cited is my own translation unless otherwise acknowledged. All images included in this chapter are screen captures from this pressing of the film unless otherwise acknowledged.

[3] The *ishin-shishi* (a combination of the terms for "restoration" and "men of purpose") were cohorts of samurai from Choshu, Satsuma and Tosa, as well as allied rōnin, that appeared in Edo and Kyoto in the mid-1850s. These *shishi* made up a significant force within the *sonnō jōi* movement of samurai wishing to topple the shogunate and restore the Emperor. Kiyokawa Hachirō is known as an influential figure within this movement, as were progressive scholar Yoshida Shōin and Japan's first prime minister, Itō Hirobumi. (Romulus Hillsborough, *Shinsengumi: The Shogun's Last Samurai Corps* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 2005), 14, 79.)

[4] Literally, "End of the Shogunate". Japanese term referring in general to the 15 years between Admiral Matthew Perry's 1853 incursion into Edo's Uraga Bay and the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

[5] Ben-Ami Shillony, *Enigma of the Emperors* (Kent: Global Oriental Ltd., 2005), 164.

[6] Interview with Shinoda, *Fūkei*, 91.

[7] Ivan Morris. *The Nobility of Failure* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 133.

[8] Ibid. 137.

[9] William W. Kelly, "Metropolitan Japan" in *Postwar Japan as History*, 189–216. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 202.

[10]Shinoda Masahiro, *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no Nihon* (Tokyo: Gogatsu Shobō, 2003), 24. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[11] Interview with Shinoda, *Fūkei*, 70.

[12] Shinoda, Masahiro. *Yami no naka no ansoku.* 161.

[13] Alain Silver, "A Thin Line Between Truth and Lies" from booklet of *Samurai Spy*. DVD. Criterion Collection, 2005.

[14] Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 68.

[15] Mellen, interview with Shinoda. *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 239.

[16] Walter Murch. *In the Blink of an Eye*. (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 2001), 62.

[17] David Phelps, "The Closed World: The Films of Shinoda Masahiro," *Sensesofcinema.com*, Dec 19, 2011. (http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articules/the-closed-world-the-films-of-masahiro-shinoda-surface-play-and-subterfuge-in-the-movies-of-a-modern-classicist/) Retrieved 3/20/2012.

[18] Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 97.

[19]Illustrating this point, Ivan Morris writes of Kusunoki, discussed earlier as the most lionized of medieval samurai in mid-20th century: "The Kemmu restoration [of the 14th century] produced the richest crop of failed heroes in Japanese history […] The reason that Masashige stands out from among the others is that his career most perfectly exemplified the Japanese heroic parabola: wholehearted effort on behalf of a hopeless cause, leading to an initial achievement and success but ending in glorious failure and a brave, poignant death." (*The Nobility of Failure*, 140)

[20] Shinoda, *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon.* 18-19.

[21] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 344.

[22] Joan Mellen. "Assassination." DVD booklet included with *Assassination*, Eureka Video, 2006.

[23] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 253.

[24] Shinoda Masahiro, *Kakenukeru fūkei* (Tokyo: Oubunsha, 1983), 44. All passages translated from Japanese by Sean Koble.

[25] Mes, "All Our Yesterdays," *Filmcomment*, Sept/Oct 2010, 62.

[26] Shinoda, *Yami no naka no ansoku*, 305.

[27] Shinoda, *Kakenukeru fūkei*, 36-37.

[28] Shinoda, *Nihongo no goho de toritai.* 214.

[29] Shinoda, *Yami no naka no ansoku*, 311.

[30] Burch. *To the Distant Observer*, 86.

[31] Barthes, 54.

[32] Mellen, interview with Shinoda. *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 239.

CHAPTER III

DOUBLE SUICIDE: HUMANIST VISIONS OF CULTURAL THEATER

"[It's] interchangeable – you are an actor in the theater or an actor in real life."
-Shinoda, 1972.[1]

Following his departure from Shochiku-Ofuna Studios in 1966, Shinoda Masahiro formed his own production company, Hyōgensha, and entered the strongest decade of both personal expression and experimentation in his film career. While his time as a director in a studio stable saw Shinoda mostly working within the constraints of genre trends (youth films, *chanbara* and gangster drama), in the late 1960s and 1970s, we find Shinoda unreservedly embracing his independent status; able to produce films from the basis of his personal artistic interests, rather than working his philosophical stance into the plot structures demanded by Shochiku's profit interests.[2] Beyond the depiction of violence as the core of human expression that pervades the vast majority of the director's works, what characterizes the films of this period is a greater employment of theatrical reference and technique, and a presentation of Japan's cultural past in the context of the present. These are employed to argue a humanistic and postmodernist reading of Japanese literary history, where the totalizing function of metanarrative is defied and the component parts of Yamato definitions of culture highlighted.

1969's *Double Suicide* (*Shinjū ten no amijima*, Hyōgensha/Art Theatre Guild)[3] exhibits the defining traits of Shinoda's independent-period work in full force. The film takes a 1721 *ningyo jōruri*[4] play by the master playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon and transposes it to the screen. However, what distinguishes *Double Suicide* from other adaptations is that the formal conventions of premodern theater are retained and even brought to the foreground, the production exposed and emphasized at the same level as the drama itself. Even as human actors take the place of the puppets traditionally associated with this performance, the "presentational" Jōruri

conventions of black-clad stage hands (called *kurogo* or *kuroko*) are retained, alongside sets covered wall-to-wall with *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, calligraphic prose and abstract brushwork by Shinoda Tōkō, a luminary of Japanese modern art and the director's cousin. The surrealistic insertion of artistic flourish and overtly theatrical presentation into what is considered the more realistic and "representational" territory of the cinema screen disrupts all expectations for this presentation of the beloved 18th century original, solidifying its place as an iconic work of 1960s postmodernism. The 1969 *Kinema Junpō* Best Ten poll placed *Double Suicide* at the coveted "Best One" position at the top of the revered critics' best-of-year list.[5] Shinoda's first appearance on the list narrowly beat several other classics of Japanese film, including his former Shochiku New Wave peer Ōshima Nagisa's *Shōnen*. Shinoda himself regarded the work as one of his most artistically successful efforts,[6] and found its resonance with the Japanese viewer in the late 1960s to be a product of a reevaluation of Japan's social order and Chikamatsu as "the great hedonist and sentimentalist of his age."[7] It is important for us as critical readers to question what elements of Chikamatsu's works justify Shinoda's labeling of the premodern author, whose works often seem to hinge on seemingly didactic *bushidō* and Buddhist exhortations, as simultaneously an artist who seeks primarily to speak for the value of human passion and our material existence in a manner contrary to mainstream thought of his time.

Beyond a mere consideration of himself an artistic compatriot of the Chikamatsu, there a is deeply personal rationale behind Shinoda's selection of *Amijima* as a vehicle for inquiry into the nature of the Japanese subject's troubled relationship with the demands of society. Shinoda relates that his own adolescent witness of a lover's suicide very much like the one performed by the characters of *Amijima* was key to his first epiphanies about the realities of the human condition:

> "Love suicide! (*shinjū!*)" came the cry. I felt the bizarre words echo in my head, and curiosity gripped my chest as I ran to the mountain. In front of me, a man wearing a military police band stood blocking my way. I could barely catch a glimpse of a man and woman's corpses in the chestnut tree grove. In my child's heart, I thought that this death was not one of being summoned by the Buddha's

> hand. The air had become ominous. This was different than the image of death I had held before now. At that time, I had finally approached an age where one embraces an interest in humanity. And so, I remember being delivered a great shock then by my realization that humans were creatures that differed from all other animals in their ability to commit suicide."[8]

According to Shinoda's own account, this desperate and masochistic expression of a conflict between compulsory patriotic duty (a soldier's assignment to be sent to the Asian front) and human feeling (the unbearable pain of being separated from his lover) spurred early suspicions that the cause of these deaths was not organic or fated by a transcendent will such as the "buddha's hand", but somehow, oddly, arose from the couple's own agency. Introduced through this experience and confirmed by the morbid culture of wartime Japan, the question of by what cultural mechanisms self-harm became not only normalized but valorized within Japanese culture would be a point of inquiry in much of Shinoda's work, and pointedly so in *Double Suicide*.

Suicide in the Japanese context has occupied a specific realm of literary and social meaning that differs from the overwhelmingly negative perception of it within Judeo-Christian cultures. Rather than as a besmirching of the gift of life granted by a Creator, self-obliteration in the Japanese context is often posed as the ultimate form of sacrifice for a higher ideal more worthy than human life – an act which creates a world "in the vacuum between what *is* and what *ought to be*."[9] The influence of the Buddhist metaphysic is clear in conceptions of suicide, in that the transient and deceptive nature of material existence is surrendered in performative tribute to a transcendent state of authentic being.[10] In Chikamatsu's Edo period, the *bushidō* ethos of the samurai elite was a particular site of suicide's valorization as a paradoxically self-affirming act, with doomed charges in battle and ritual self-disembowelment posthumously confirming these warriors as suprahuman heroes with convictions too pure for the corrupt earthly realm. Both of these acts were performed by Kusunoki Masashige, raised as an exemplar of virtue by Edo-period notables from Chikamatsu[11] to Saigo Takamori, and whose legendary image was present even in exhortations of *gyokusai*[12] during the Pacific War.

These *bushidō* ideologies were so prevalent in Edo-period Japanese thought and literature that their diffusion spread beyond class lines to the strata of commoner culture.[13] For the *chōnin*, in general more concerned with economics than the samurai's Neo-Confucian duty to preserve the social order, the ideology of performative tribute to sublime ideals still held strong sway, and the lovers' suicide as seen in *Amijima* "may be seen as an ultimate expression of such devotion, a townsman's version of the samurai's seppuku, or suicide of honor."[14] Revealing the conceptual correlation between rejection of the self-preservation instinct and proof of "authentic" devotion, the term *shinjū* became common in the pleasure quarters for acts involving some form of self-mortification which asserted love's primacy over the material.[15] *Shinjū* "was used to designate actions that demonstrated what was actually inside a person's heart… The necessity of behaving in a way that will satisfy society, even if it violates one's inmost feelings, creates an atmosphere of insincerity that must be broken if true feelings are to be recognized."[16] Thus, Shinoda's assertion that the shape of modern Japanese identity is a function of *bushidō*'s absorption into the the commoner classes[17] demands that the implications of views on suicide be considered in their continuing cultural impact on the postwar Japanese psychology.

Why is death so common a preoccupation in traditional Japanese culture? What other impact do feudal-era ways of thinking have in a new "democratic Japan"?[18] Seeking to answer these questions, Shinoda entered Tokyo's elite Waseda University, giving up a promising track-and-field career to focus his studies on performance culture and the theater of Chikamatsu. As the director explains his rationale: "For me, the secrets of the art of the Japanese people are concealed within the development of Jōruri and Nō, and so I made the history of theater my standpoint… While my professors had a powerful influence over me, an understanding of the conditions under which Japanese theater and the ideology of specters that I hoped to grasp through my studies was something that I could not develop at a university."[19] After the death of Shinoda's mother, financial difficulties forced the future filmmaker to leave academia and find work to support himself. Fortunately, Shinoda's subsequent employment at Shochiku proved to be fertile

opportunity for creative application of his knowledge, giving him the opportunity to explore through his early *gendaigeki* the cultural legacy of his studies as manifest in the postwar landscape which surrounded him. However, because Shochiku consistently refused his requests to film *Amijima*, believing it to be an unprofitable venture,[20] his chance to explore Chikamatsu's world would have to wait until the Art Theater Guild offered to fund the production in 1968.

Propelled by his childhood brushes with the valorized tradition of lovers' suicide and a need to confront the death-oriented mindset of the war era, Shinoda became convinced that the cultural ideologies governing Chikamatsu's Genroku society were still functioning at a basic but very critical level in 'modern' Japan. "We speak of "returning to Japan," but what does this mean? We are also returning to wartime thinking, ancient thinking, and also the pre-modern thinking of the Edo period. The first problem is what we are reviving as Japanese."[21] As he prepared to shoot *Double Suicide*, the director theorized that by intelligently deconstructing Chikamatsu's play, he could make the audience aware of the presence of how *Amijima*'s metanarrative propositions paralleled their own notions of what constituted an ideal social structure. Thus, the director's aim became an approach which excluded neither the 20th century nor the 18th century gaze, but established a dialectic with both by overtly highlighting the presence of both author's pen and director's camera: "We, the artists, auteurs living in the 20th century… were not just approaching the play, but approaching it through the author, Chikamatsu, and approaching it through his inner landscape."[22] In recognition of this, this film would serve as a directorial exercise in both formally establishing a cultural genealogy and inculpating the creative reproduction of certain postures towards death in the effacement of human dignity.

The source work of *Shinjū ten no amijima*[23] itself is widely regarded as the finest of Chikamatsu's *sewamono*, or domestic drama plays, praised for its moral complexity, multidimensional characters, and virtuoso use of allusion and wordplay to imbue the text with multiple layers of meaning. As one of the playwright's many entries in the subgenre of *shinjūmono* (often termed "love suicide plays"), it is often referenced as the height of Edo-period

tragic pathos, populated by *chōnin* (urban commoner) characters whose flaws and desires ensure their inability to exist in a world of conflicting obligations, whether financial or filial. In contrast, the heroes of Chikamatsu's *jidaimono* (historical epics) are often fallen or otherwise marginalized elites, as exemplified by Semimaru or Watōnai.[24] In most instances these aristocrats and warriors are vindicated in the final act of their stories, in large part because they are able to bring the conflicting internal forces of *giri* (duty, obligation) and *ninjō* (emotion, desire) into alignment through their unnatural charisma, selflessness and the influence accorded to rank.

In the *sewamono*, which serve as heightened representations of urban society contemporary to Chikamatsu, the Manichean morality of the epic landscape is replaced with more emotionally nuanced, believable dilemmas that cannot be surmounted by courage and the inborn moral superiority of the upper class posited by Neo-confucian thought. Keene writes: "[Chikamatsu's sewamono] heroes are not royal personages like Hamlet or King Lear, men who are free to live according to or opposed to society as they please, but *little men who have no choice but to exist in a social framework* [emphasis mine]."[25] It is clear that Chikamatsu was an artist who embraced the nuanced differences of how the *chōnin* of his domestic plays were able to engage with society relative to the elites lionized in his history plays, and was resolved to express this difference honestly. In the one of the playwright's few recorded commentaries, he states: "My first principle is to distinguish between the social position of each and every character, from the nobility and the samurai on down, and to depict them accordingly, from their demeanor to the way they speak… This is because it is essential that readers sympathize with the feelings of each character."[26] Chikamatsu, born into the samurai elite, experienced in the court aristocracy, and finally rising to fame as a *chōnin* playwright, had ample opportunity to witness the realities of human existence that transcended social class and articulate the presence of pathos even in the most humble folk of the new urban society.

Shinoda Masahiro is unequivocal in his admiration for Chikamatsu's literary perspective as the first to directly articulate the theretofore-unspoken social upheaval of the Genroku period:

"As the world of the *Genji monogatari* which had been founded upon slavery crumbled, the rise of the modern *chōnin's* world of money and *giri* was felt. In that space, Chikamatsu was writing with a self-awareness that beheld artists, merchants and Hikaru Genji at the same level."[27] The playwright's unbinding of drama from the world of the elite is what Shinoda seizes on in declaring this playwright a humanist, but it is Chikamatsu's refusal to condemn as *unnatural* the emotional and sexual impulses that lead his *shinjūmono* heroes to their doom that justifies the appellation of sentimentalist. As Gerstle writes, "passions are natural in Chikamatsu's world, but in exploring time and again its excesses, he seems to have been inevitably led to confront the question of essential goodness and the nature of evil, and to examine the consequences of our passions and actions."[28] Still, however progressive a humanist Chikamatsu may have been, his outlook on life remained a product of a samurai upbringing informed by an education in classical thought, attested to by the overwhelming number of direct references to the Chinese and medieval Japanese canons found throughout his work.

Shinoda's 2008 memoir elaborates on the director's interpretation of Chikamatsu's complex "inner landscape," which Shinoda praises for the "human insight of [Chikamatsu's] *sewamono*" and "deep investment shown in the heartrending (*aisetsu*) literary style of the *michiyuki*" complicated by his criticism of the "lurid depiction by a former samurai of the agonizing cries (*abikyōkan*) of those committing the act of *shinjū* while attempting to put forth images of spiritual martyrdom."[29] The implication of Shinoda's words is that what characterizes the playwright's work is a tension between a commitment to humanism on the one hand, and on the other a *bushidō*-based obsession with performative loyalty through violence, reinforced with Buddhist visions of a superior realm of authenticity existing outside material reality. What Shinoda seeks to ask through his adaptation of Chikamatsu's stunning accomplishment is if the gripping tale can be appreciated as art *without* conflating the author's progressive ideals with the incidental dissemination of regressive cultural posture towards violence. As a creator who recognizes that his own aesthetic sensibilities necessarily bear the markers of cultural

interpellation, this is a question that must be addressed if Shinoda is to claim himself as a filmmaker who analyzes his experience of Japanese culture in good faith and conscious of bias.

The primary tension in the plot of *Shinjū ten no amijima* emerges from the relationships of the Osaka merchant Kamiya Jihei, his duty to his wife Osan, and his deep, visceral love for the courtesan Koharu, who wholeheartedly reciprocates his passion (Figure 3.1). While earlier Chikamatsu heroes, such as Tokubei of 1703's *The Love Suicide at Sonezaki*, are depicted as the victims of tragic coincidences, Jihei's own passion for his prostitute lover is recognized to be the source of the financial troubles and scandalous reputation that threaten to disintegrate his household and his marriage. The playwright shows little didactic interest in condemning Jihei, however, and instead extracts empathy from the incompatibility of the love he feels for *both* Osan and Koharu.[30] Should he betray his heart, giving up his beloved Koharu to a marriage with his hated archrival Tahei? Or should he cast away his obligations to his wife Osan, so devoted that she is willing to surrender her husband to Koharu to prevent the courtesan from killing herself to avoid the fearful betrothal?

Overcome with a sense of responsibility for driving Koharu to suicidal desperation, Osan and Jihei plan to sell the family's kimono in order to redeem the prostitute and save her life. This plan to sacrifice the family's respectable appearance for the sake of Jihei's *ninjo* and Osan's *giri* that bind them to Koharu is discovered by Osan's father, who forces a divorce and reclaims the kimono. Unencumbered by filial obligations,[31] Jihei promptly absconds with Koharu and the two kill themselves, praying for the intercession of Amida Buddha to unite them in the world to come.

Figure 3.1. From left: *Amijima*'s Kamiya Jihei (Kabuki star Nakamura Kichiemon II), Osan, and Koharu (both played by Iwashita Shima), as depicted in Shinoda's *Double Suicide.*

In *Sonezaki shinjū*, much of the dramatic tension of the early scenes is derived from alternating moments of hope and despair before circumstances force the titular act. However, in *Amijima*, the web of obligations is too complex for escape without a painful denial of self, and the fate of the lovers appears firmly set from the start. From the first act, as Koharu disturbs her samurai customer with questions about suicide methods and the narrator intones about how "so deeply, hopelessly is [Jihei] tied to Koharu by the ropes of an ill-starred love"[32] (long before we have even met the man!), there is little question that the lovers' only liberation from this social conundrum lies in death. Gerstle summarizes the playwright's framing of the tension between *giri* and *ninjō*: "For Jihei, and the other tragic figures who populate Chikamatsu's love-suicide plays, there is no earthly solution to this dilemma, because society viewed it in absolute terms; equivocation was not a rational choice."[33] This absolutist mindset identified by Gerstle as the source of dramatic impetus in Chikamatsu, embodied in the *kuroko*, is in fact the target of Shinoda's probing camera lens, and we shall revisit this notion in the following sections.

Chikamatsu himself appears keenly aware that the subject's constant evaluation of his or her place within a network of sociocultural concerns is what drives the great majority of his decision-making processes. Unlike many of his predecessors in the traditional Japanese theater, questions of individual morality in Chikamatsu's *sewamono* are very often subordinated to critical depictions of a superstructure directing the rational decisions of his subjects. "Chikamatsu offers mercy even to the child-killer Sota [of *Futago Sumidagawa*], and at the same time is critical of the demands of duty and loyalty in samurai society… While condemning us to be forever trapped within the strictures of morality, duty, and the law, Chikamatsu stretches the audience's sense of mercy."[34]

The final relevant bridge between the original work of the playwright Chikamatsu and the director Shinoda lies in their mutual belief that the true value of art emerges from the tension

maintained between realism and emotional resonance. The sole account of the playwright's theory states:

> "Art is something that lies between the skin and the flesh [*hiniku*], between the make-believe [*uso*] and the real [*jitsu*]. In today's world, of course, given the preference for realistic acting, an actor playing a chief retainer may imitate the speech and mannerisms of a real chief retainer, but if that's the case, would a real chief retainer of a daimyō wear makeup on his face like an actor?... This is what I mean by 'between the skin and the flesh.' Art is make-believe and not make-believe, it is real and not real; entertainment lies between the two."[35]

As these words illustrate, the value of art for Chikamatsu lay in the recognition of drama as a product, not as an organic manifestation of the way the world outside the theatre doors truly was. In contrast with the emphasis on the "realistic" spectacle of the Kabuki stage and the symbolic gestures of Nō, the overt artifice within Chikamatsu's Jōruri productions was humanized, and emotional realism emphasized over representational realism to make the critical social commentary easier to swallow through tempered aesthetic detachment.[36] It is precisely this tension that Shinoda seeks to reintroduce to cinema in *Double Suicide*, and therefore it is worthwhile to now consider the director's consistent utilization of specific mechanisms of controlled alienation which characterize traditional Japanese art as a presentational medium.

Noel Bürch, in his book *To the Distant Observer*, argues that the essential trait of pre-modern Japanese art is a constant emphasis on the "presence of the context," wherein acts of production are explicitly staged and regarded as equally valuable to the creative product.[37] In *Double Suicide*, this posture reveals itself in the presence of intertextual reference and the recognition of artificial means and processes of production, both of which I have already discussed in part in relation to their employment in *Assassination*. As an adaptation of the theatrical performance of *Amijima*, the intertertexuality of the film *Double Suicide* cannot help but be overt in its recognition of its own emergence as a result of a long line of cultural input, as Chikamatsu's Jōruri original was through allusions to the Nō play *Kagekiyo* and the legends of Sugawara no Michizane.[38] Jihei and Koharu do not act in a void, but are understanding and

responding to their crises through constant reference to an aestheticized vision of past conduct typified as essentially Japanese. *Double Suicide*'s superposition of film over Japanese theater is not falsely portrayed as a revolutionary break within narrative tradition, but merely another restructuring of signifiers to fit within a new medium of expression.

To explain the difference in meaning communicated through the revelation of production in Japanese presentational drama, we turn to French semiotician Roland Barthes, whose theories regarding Japan's cultural reverence for "nothingness" (*mu*) are often raised in Shinoda's writings to illustrate both the intertextual and presentational values underlying Japanese culture.[39] Barthes, using Jōruri as an example, argued that the Japanese conceptual paradigm recognized a signifying gesture and signified object as separate, denying the illusory reality of the dramatic stage:

> "The sources of the theater are exposed in their emptiness. What is expelled from the stage is hysteria, i.e. theater itself; and what is put in its place is the action necessary to the production of the spectacle: work is substituted for inwardness… it rids the actor's manifestation of any whiff of the sacred and abolishes the metaphysical link the West cannot help establishing between body and soul, […] Destiny and man, God and creature."[40]

What both Barthes' writings and Shinoda's film suggest through their framing of the Jōruri presentational mode is a belief in the strength of the Japanese premodern arts being located in the appreciation of drama not only in spite of, but *because of* its denaturalization. Most sane viewers don't believe that it is actually the gods onstage behind Nō masks, but the performance's beauty is still perceived in the skilled artifice of a symbolic representation of the divine. In the conception of these men, the Japanese presentational theater deliberately functions to expose the component parts of staged narrative, offering them up both for an appreciation of their aesthetic force as emergent from separate skilled agencies and for critical analysis as products of human design with potential for either deception or enlightenment. While *Assassination* very much holds itself to the spirit of this presentational philosophy, we shall see that *Double Suicide* directly cites it throughout via inclusion of immediately identifiable formal elements of the Jōruri stage.

Rather than amounting to "an encounter with the "stranger" (or even the Other)," the decentering aesthetic gestures as seen in Shinoda's films often represent, in Nina Cornyetz' phrasing, "a brush with the familiar, although potentially unsettling past self (as formulated in the present)."[41] The apprehension of the modern in the premodern is encouraged not only in the *Double Suicide*'s interweaving of stage and cinema, presentational and representational, but even in the dialogue spoken the film. In order to "translate Japanese culture for modern Japanese," Shinoda contracted screenwriter and novelist Tomioka Taeko (his regular collaborator) to rewrite Chikamatsu's dialogue in contemporary Japanese; albeit in an Osaka dialect that kept the regional association of the original intact while rendering the archaic prose comprehensible.[42] For the Japanese-speaking viewer, this is key in that it prevents the past from being fully mystified through the *jidaigeki* signifier. Having the protagonists of *Amijima* articulate their dilemmas and despair as if they were modern-day Osakans, rather than denizens of "old Japan," viewers can engage as one human to another, and ideally recognize themselves in their image.

The film *Double Suicide* begins with a sequence that serves to contextualize the film to follow not as an expression of reality, but as a performance which has been generated from the conscious effort of creative human minds. Images of the backstage area of a Jōruri theater flash by; the lead "puppeteer" (actor Hamamatsu Jun) removes his spectacles to hide his human face with the hood of the black-clad *kuroko* puppeteer/stagehands of the traditional theater, placing his actions at a remove from human agency and mystifying the mortal presence behind the mask (Figure 3.2). The director's voice is heard speaking with screenwriter Tomioka, laying out changes to the climactic graveyard scene, declaring an intent to contrast the "fetishizing of space" and the "bodies of the couple" – or in other words, to juxtapose the ideological and the visceral, signified and signifier, in their difference.

Meanwhile, *kashira* (puppet heads) are attached to wooden, kimono-clad bodies to create Jihei, Koharu and Osan. These modular *kashira* depicted here serve to gesture, not towards a specific individual, but a Jōruri archetype, whether the *wakaotoko* ("young man"), *darasuke*

("villainous bully"), or *musume* ("charming girl"). (Figure 3.3)[43] This image implies that the flesh-and-blood humans who will soon take the place of these puppets are not so different – acting out archetypical roles according to the demands of an author's script. This ambiguity between human subject and aesthetic object is visually articulated throughout the film; in one striking example, the live Koharu (Iwashita Shima) bites her veil in a conventional *ningyo* pose of feminine anguish. (Figure 3.4) Following this introductory series of images in which the thematic goals of the creator Shinoda are mapped out quite clearly, a Jōruri chanter, the voice of narrative authority, lyrically declares the author and title, thrusting us with literal ceremony and an awareness of origin into the core diegesis of the film.

Figure 3.2. The creator's hidden face

Figure 3.3. Koharu/Jihei awaiting new bodies

However, it is not long before we are jarred back out of the representational illusion of a filmic reality, as Jihei peers over the edge of a bridge to find gathered several ominous figures we recognize as the *kuroko*. These men, clad in black robes that signify invisibility in the convention of traditional Japanese theater, gaze impassively down at a couple in a morbid embrace, having committed the act that Jihei and Koharu will commit a mere 90 minutes from this point in cinematic time. (Figure 3.5) This jarring image serves to inform several purposes of Shinoda's interpretation of the *Amijima* play. In one sense this shows that Jihei is acting with the awareness that his road to death is following a path tread by other, similarly desperate lovers. This acts as an overt intertextual nod, perhaps to *Sonezaki* and earlier *shinjūmono*?[44] This establishment of past narrative as a foundation for the central diegesis also creates a sense of cyclicality: a protagonists'

witness of modeled cultural behavior, followed by a later action upon the suggestion of the spectacle.[45] The *kuroko*'s presence is somehow accountable for not only Jihei and Koharu's morbid fates, but for that of unknown numbers of other lovers, although it is not clear in what manner at this early point in the film. Although Jihei's eyes fail to register the *kuroko* surrounding him, Shinoda leaves us as viewer with no room to forget the presence of the creative forces actively producing this narrative, constantly reintroducing the alienating presence of the presentational into the cinematic frame continuously from this scene onwards.

Figure 3.4. *Ningyo* maiden (L)[46] and living Koharu (R), **t**he gesture conflating human and puppet

Figure 3.5. Jihei presented with his "fate"

Even as their uncanny presence is ignored by the characters, the *kuroko* can be recognized to overtly influence the events on the stage - always lurking on the edges of the frame, active and consistent in their prodding of Jihei and Koharu towards an unnatural end. As Jihei enters the bustling pleasure quarters, they draw him down the path to Koharu's brothel, lighting his path with candles. (Figure 3.6) The *kuroko* use light not only to direct Jihei, but the viewer's perception of the scenes: we witness the stagehands manipulating light sources throughout the film, exerting control over the play of light and shadow that Shinoda, among others, has expressed as the most essential element of presentation in cinematography.[47] (Figure 3.7)They freeze time to provide exposition, thrusting a pleading letter from Osan to Koharu into the camera lens to contextualize and rationalize the dramatic development of the love triangle for the viewer. (Figure 3.8.) As with the title cards earlier, the missive's content is summarized in a chanter's

cadence, again inserting theatrical modes of narrative presentation to denaturalize the cinematic image.

Figure 3.6. Jihei drawn forwards by the *kuroko*

Figure 3.7. A *kuroko* shedding light

Within the filmed version of *Double Suicide*, the overt insertion of a premodern presentational force into the cinematic medium, apex of the representational, has led to much speculation by some critics about Shinoda's intention to depict them as agents of "fate," reinforcing conceptions of Shinoda's primary tone being one of nihilistic resignation.[48] This interpretation is understandable; the impassive, resolute stagehands lurk in the corners of each set until there is call to manipulate the environment to prod our protagonists towards death. Ultimately, they even assist Jihei to set up the noose with which he hangs himself, and it is our chief *kuroko* who kicks down the Jizo shrine he stands upon to conclude Jihei's tragic story.[49]

However, it is clear that to apprehend the ominous stagehands directing our characters as manifestations of a transcendent force of destiny is to misread Shinoda's intent. The director explains: "I basically took away the rule in puppet theater that the *kuroko* must not be recognized as any force within the fictional world. And by taking that away, I thought the audience would be able to confront the author, or the filmmaker, or the artist themselves."[50] It is clear that the *kuroko* are intended to be recognized as a very human force, active in its role of laying out a path to the suicide of Jihei and Koharu. It is not the demand of the heavens that their deaths come to pass, but the demand of Chikamatsu, Shinoda, and ultimately, the cultural logic of Japan to which these creators were responding in order to draw forth the sympathy of the audience. The second aspect

made clear by this quote is that Shinoda seeks to stimulate a *confrontation* with these constructed realities. It is not enough that the audience is moved by how unfair and unjust it is that Koharu and Jihei are made to die in large part because of social constructs which cannot be reconciled with the passions that make them human. They must question whether these barriers to unfettered decision-making are organic or artificial in nature, and question their values based on that realization.

This denaturalization of our perspective on events is accomplished further through the set design of the film. As noted in my discussion of *Assassination*, our view of events in both *Double Suicide* and throughout Shinoda's larger filmography is often frustrated by lattices, pillars and other objects that serve in part to visually suggest, at least from the non-diegetic perspective of the camera, that subjects are blocked in, caged or otherwise hampered in their free movement. (Figure 3.9.) However, there is another, more significant notion at play, for the intent of the blocking and *mise-en-scene* construction is to disrupt the path of the all-seeing-eye of the filmmaker's camera, leaving room for doubt in the objectivity of our witness. As Cornyetz asks, "If the subject is decentered, then from where would a gaze like the panoptic (or male) one operate in its so-called masterful dominance?"[51] Although the protagonists' environment appears to control and restrict their agency, it only due to the illusion of a fixed perspective given by the camera, self-reflexively frustrated and falsified by the subject's unwillingness to center themselves in an unobstructed view.

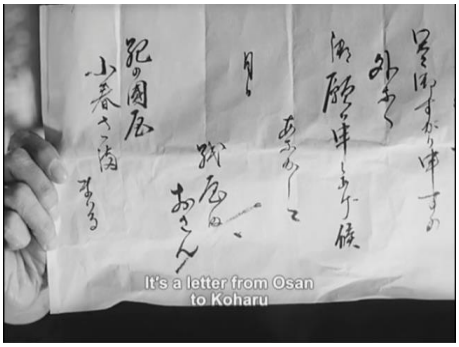

Figure 3.8. "A letter from Osan"

Figure 3.9. Frustrated perspective, false imprisonment

Most of the sequences we see occur within overtly staged sets, Shinoda presenting to us spaces suggestive of the Edo-period pleasure quarters rather than "realistic" background that misleadingly asserts witness of an authentic historical moment. While Shinoda acknowledges that the impressionistic quality of the backdrops is due in part to budget constraints of working under the Art Theater Guild,[52] the tableaus of towering *ukiyo-e* prints (Figure 3.10) and calligraphic prose (Figure 3.11) that stretch across the walls and other surfaces cast away any doubt that the artificial spaces are a mere artifact of the film's independent production. Rather, the images serve both to alienate the viewer from the drama and place the characters in a space where they are constantly surrounded by artistically-mediated representations of an established text.

The large-scale reproductions of woodblock-printed courtesans and Kabuki actors suggest that the protagonists of *Double Suicide* live surrounded by cultural references for their conduct, serving as the equivalent to Chikamatsu's interspersion of literary reference. The blown-up images loom over Jihei and Koharu in the licensed quarter scenes, making it impossible for the two to ignore the presence of the figures of yesteryear who have been lionized into flattened but suprahuman images through popular culture. Although it is not clear if Shinoda is intending the large handwritten kana panels to specifically represent a Jōruri libretto, these too have the appearance of either a script or other form of dramatic text, externalizing the intertextual perception of the characters and authors that they are, to some degree, playing necessary roles in a historical narrative.

While both the illustrated prints and the prose characters speak to the pre-written in relation to Chikamatsu and the premodern/medieval culture referenced in the original *Amijima* libretto, the violent and very modern strokes of Shinoda Tōkō's brush appear as backdrop throughout the film as well. (Figure 3.12) This employment of a distinctively modern style of art as an impressionistic backdrop for the raging passions at play in the story speaks far more to the visual sensibility of the director at work than Chikamatsu, and serves to implicate the artist of the 1960s alongside his premodern forebear in stimulating the forces that move the lovers along to

the final act. The direction of our attention towards elements established long before the actors ever ascended the stage.

> overturns the logic that insists on the suppression of the written text so that the visual [cinematic] text may achieve its fullest diegetic effect. Instead, the origin is repeatedly disinterred, and it subordinates the visual to its insistent presence. It is through the writing that the puppet-play characters come into being, that is, they come into being in language. Moreover, this subject-in-language is subject to the law that is the script, with its temporal and spatial limitations. These "laws" cannot be transgressed: it is written.[53]

Cornyetz' usage of scare quotes around the word "laws" is appropriate: Shinoda provides no evidence that the forces at play around Jihei and Koharu are inviolable, but this is in part because the characters make no attempt to resist the prodding of the *kuroko* or tear apart the texts that make up their environment. These presentational forces, now acting upon the diegesis, are simply appear to be acceptable to the protagonists, as natural to their landscape as the tatami mats and fusuma for which they stand in place. No overt violence or force on their part is necessary, for their agency has been fully interpellated by *Double Suicide*'s subjects – they simply change the environment, or aid in actions already in process, and the characters guide themselves in order to progress the narrative.

Figure 3.10. Ideal images of *ukiyo-e*.

Figure 3.11. The prewritten script.

Figure 3.12. Psychology exteriorized.

Noel Burch aptly articulates the essential meaning behind the imagery in relation to the prevailing posture towards literary production in Japan: "The Japanese social system […] acknowledges and indeed deliberately emphasizes *the material reality of the circulation of signs* [emphasis mine]. This system erodes the very foundation of our [Euro-American] ideology of the Creator as the Supremely Free Human Being, of the Artist-God, of the Book and the Word."[54] It must be acknowledged that the presentational aspects of the play that Shinoda violently inserts into the film are not simply representations of Chikamatsu's subjective sense of pathos or Shinoda's will to deconstruct, but create striking *mise en scènes* for the sake of fulfilling long-established conventions of beauty. As Phelps notes: "Both the set and the kuroko are totally devoted not only to deconstructing the play as place, but to making it as beautiful as possible."[55] Shinoda forthrightly acknowledges that it is out of a desire to satisfy his own aesthetic sensibility, itself a product of Japanese culture, that he has chosen to revive the play in a visual fashion that retains at its core the commitment to tragic sentiment of the Chikamatsu original:

> It is because of beauty that I find myself interested not only in people who actually go to the lengths of dying, but those who are on their way to death, or being corrupted, or failing and falling apart. The victors are always arrogant. But losers lose with a great amount of imagination. And I think that in this sense, the losers are closer to cinema's own possibilities of imagination. [56]

While alienation of the viewer is his overt aim in the film, the creator himself cannot fully alienate himself from the work manifested through his effort and passion, any more than his subjects can remain unaffected by the cultural "texts" surrounding them. Even as a work of deconstruction, Shinoda recognizes that *Double Suicide* must paradoxically be mediated by his subjective aesthetic sensibility as a director, and this is from where the complicity of art in reproducing the cultural upbringing of the artist emerges.

Perhaps the most striking image of the pre-written text's influence over Koharu and Jihei's fates occurs in the penultimate sequence of the film. Desser notes that the third act takes the two out of the Awazu Kiyoshi's vibrant theatrical sets and into the "infinite space" made possible by the cinematic context; a space that appears to offer freedom from the formal and

ideological bounds of the traditional theater.[57] The traditional third-act *michiyuki* of *Amijima* is upstaged by a vision of the couple making desperate love in a graveyard before their suicide, a moment intriguing in its glaring deviation from the *Jōruri* tradition of the poetic travel metaphor for the couple's reconciliation with their impending death – generally considered the high point of the performance. The artifice of pious Buddhist proclamations is absent on the tongues of the lovers – rather than the utterances of the *nenbutsu* which characterize the conclusion of the play, we witness the very human event of Koharu complaining about her aching feet. The virtuoso wordplay of Chikamatsu which highlights the landmarks of their progress is heard only briefly, from the chief *kuroko* himself, and in the foggy darkness we witness nothing that approximates the vistas described by Chikamatsu with grand historical allusions. Instead the final moments are occupied by a wordless and indulgent, several-minute long erotic encounter on the stage of death. (Figure 3.13) The literary conceit accorded to Koharu and Jihei's final moments together by Chikamatsu's pen is refuted by the director's rejection of the notion that human passion is something that can be indefinitely restrained by such social constructs.[58] Koharu and Jihei's hunger for each other, shown in the life-affirming sex act, is what consumes these two amidst this environment of death, rather than a strict adherence to a cultural script designed to objectify this ultimate expression of subjective desire into the most beautiful image possible.

However, the infinite space as presented through cinema, the promise of unbound expression offered by modern technology, is itself shown to be an illusion. The textual signposts and guiding presences that direct the doomed pair are more present and insistent than ever, regardless of the camera's freedom to leave the theatrical stage. The site the two choose for their final, passionate encounter is directly beneath the gravestone reading Kamiya Jihei – in fact the actual grave of the paper-seller around whose suicide Chikamatsu constructed his beloved Jōruri narrative, in truth located not in Osaka's Amijima, but beneath the quintessentially Japanese edifice of Kiyomizudera in Toribeno, Kyoto.[59] Even amidst this deviation from the narrative, as far as the text is concerned Jihei's death remains quite literally set in stone. (Figure 3.14) The

agents of the artists pen, though unable to prevent the expression of the couple's overwhelming passion, still stand ready to manipulate circumstances to drive the protagonists to a demanded conclusion. As the two engage in heated sex that seems juxtaposed with the mannered, conventionalized interactions seen in the rest of the film, they remain under the vigilant watch of Hamamatsu Jun's gaze which pierces through the mesh of his *kuroko* hood.

Figure 3.13. Unbridled lust amidst death

Figure 3.14. Under the *kuroko*'s gaze, with Jihei's name carved into the gravestone

Koharu and Jihei's small rebellion against the pre-written does not prevent their ultimate fate, but they do temporarily reclaim a small amount of humanity through it. This image problematizes the deterministic form of nihilism often pejoratively assigned to Shinoda by critics. To accept that Koharu and Jihei are "unwitting victim[s] of circumstance whose only expression is in the violence of a local, historical politics that can't be transcended"[60] is to fail to recognize that their choices are, in the end, made of their own volition. The *kuroko* are mere men hiding behind a mystified authority of convention, and the "scenery" (or text) can be, and is, destroyed – and yet, infuriatingly, the narrative moves forward regardless. This suggests that, to some significant degree, they have *chosen* to respond to the suggestion of the production, to follow the script rather than meaningfully challenge its influence manifest all around them with more than impotent rage and hedonism. Even as Shinoda's versions of Jihei and Koharu find themselves guided by cultural pressures they have internalized, there are always moments where the force of *ninjō,* a "primal urge so strong it confirms the individual in his/her individualism,"[61] causes a deviation from cultural narrative – but not for more than a few beautiful moments. Perhaps it is

impossible to remain consistently and fully in resistance to the cultural forces in operation on our decision making, but through *Double Suicide*, Shinoda attempts to at least stimulate his viewer to recognize and historicize the material basis for why we social beings think the way we do.

Shinoda once said of *Amijima*:

> It is very hard to understand why Chikamatsu selected Jihei as the hero. However, he did. He wanted to show the enormous power of human sensuality over a very ordinary man and how this kind of love could destroy the small, solid world of ordinary people. Love destroyed the established world of this man, a world which he had constructed so carefully. To Chikamatsu, love always took the shape of sensual passion; it was never platonic.[62]

In both the *sewamono* of the playwright and in the films of Shinoda Masahiro, it is rarely the cold beauty of ideological fulfillment, but rather an uncontrollable erotic fire from which dramatic conflict and pathos emerge. In the case of *Double Suicide*, Jihei's downfall is propelled not by malicious villainy, but a passion that could seize the heart of anyone. And yet, the ideological framework of *giri* imposed under the Neo-Confucian episteme of Tokugawa Japan renders the realization of Jihei and Koharu's all-too-relatable love incompatible with life in society. As they approach death, even their passion for each other becomes framed in terms of obligation; when an emotional Koharu challenges Jihei as to why he must die with her instead of being with Osan, he responds "Because it's my duty! (*Omaesan ni giri tatete!*)". Because they always return to framing their options in terms of *giri*, even the act of cutting their hair to symbolically renounce their worldly obligations does not drive away the *kuroko*. Gesture by itself has no power to exorcise the cultural framework through which they locate their moral place.

It is certain that class commentary underlay Chikamatsu's deliberate selection of *chōnin* protagonists to meet a tragic end under the circumstances found in *Amijima*. The playwright's work suggests that it is very rarely the elites who suffer most from the ideological foundations of culture, but the little people struggling to resolve their duties dictated by an omnipresent social matrix to which they bear the greatest burden of service and self-restraint. When noble characters such as Semimaru or Watōnai suffer, it is due to supernatural influence or in order to make their

ultimate triumph that much sweeter for the trials they have faced. But there is no triumph to be found for the commoners Jihei and Koharu – the combination of their nature as human beings driven by passion, but enjoying no influence over the myriad definitions of *giri* imposed upon them leads only to frustration. Even when divine intervention is suggested ("Believers and unbelievers alike will share in the divine grace [of Amida Buddha]"[63]), it does not aid *Amijima*'s tragic pair in this mortal realm: they must die before the titular net of Amida Buddha's salvation can catch them. Even if it is intended to create sympathy for two suicides condemned as immoral under Neo-confucian logic, the fact that Chikamatsu offers the satisfaction of bourgeois desires *only* following an exit from this world implicitly asserts a moral order inherently opposed to expressions of *ninjō* as *the* organic state of being that asserts itself over material human existence. In so doing, Chikamatsu's pathos serves to self-reflexively encourage adoption of the mindset behind the phenomena it sets out to protest. This is the point where Shinoda's film and Chikamatsu's play deviate, as the *Double Suicide* director sets out to confirm that these aesthetic sensibilities too are fallible human products that can be challenged when harmful to the dignity of human life.

Shinoda's film makes clear through *kuroko*'s inability to physically manipulate the actors themselves that the laws of this culturally-coded "reality" which the couple obey are imposed not through violence, but interpellation. As personifications of ideological state apparatuses, the *kuroko* simply guide Jihei and Koharu by alter the conditions in which the characters exist, changing the spaces, providing necessary props, and directing their attention with lights and sound – but it is the couple who in the end must act upon these suggestions. However, even when committed to escaping the network of conflicting obligations and validating their basic human passions in the graveyard, the two are never able to fully escape the constructs of Japanese society. Jihei's death on the *torii* gate indicates Shinoda's unequivocal condemnation of the thanatosian fixations of Yamato culture and the "emperor system," from which "all Japanese culture flows,"[64] presenting this man's fate as a sacrifice before the Shinto edifice symbolic of the

kokka (national household). (Figure 3.15) Even in death, they are manipulated by the literary forces in a manner contrary to their desires, laid head to foot in a manner that symbolically refutes their idealistic vision of their togetherness in Amida Buddha's utopian Pure Land. (Figure 3.16) The love of *Amijima*'s tragic pair may be a real and humanizing force, but the reproduction of their act in culture (even in *Double Suicide*) necessarily renders them manipulable cultural objects rather than human subjects in death.

Figure 3.15. Jihei as a sacrifice to national culture.

Figure 3.16. The couple's desires, posthumously manipulated.

Through a consistent inscription of the production of *Double Suicide* within the film's diegesis, the episteme that *giri* and *ninjō* are fundamentally and organically opposed forces, rather than conceptual constructs of a sociocultural order, is called to task for the effacement of *Amijima*'s lovers in death. Still, upon deeper reading it is clear this only serves as a function of the ultimate thesis of *Double Suicide*. The concepts of *giri* and *ninjō* are merely manifestations of the Japanese sense of beauty expressed in narrative, culturally-specific rationalizations of an irrational impulse towards a sublime ideal. This is the core of Shinoda's argument for Chikamatsu's status as a humanist in conflict with his own *bushidō* and Buddhism-derived sense of pathos. This is not an accusation levied at Chikamatsu in particular, but is a skepticism applicable to all artists, who have by virtue of their epistemological cultivation within their cultural context internalized narratives in one form or another to make sense of the social structure around them and function according to (or in resistance against) its terms of conduct. Shinoda's doubt that his own desire for humanistic expression can transcend the fact of his sense

of aesthetic tendencies has been molded by a childhood well versed in classics of Japanese literature and art imbued with idealized visions of death and obligation.[65] That the director must acknowledge his own role in reproducing this ideological baggage as an unavoidable function of his creative projects makes the distantiation techniques employed in *Double Suicide* all the more key to his objective to challenge the absolutist terms upon which Japanese culture is founded and argue for the value and dignity of a passionate and unpredictable human existence.

Notes

[1] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 245.

[2] Phelps, "Bridging the Centuries."

[3] *Double Suicide*, DVD, directed by Shinoda Masahiro (1969; New York: Criterion, 2001). Dialogue cited is my own translation unless otherwise acknowledged. All images included in this chapter are screen captures from this pressing of the film unless otherwise acknowledged.

[4] The traditional Japanese puppet theater, also known as *bunraku*, which hit its peak in the Genroku period of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Hereafter this theatrical mode will be referred to by the proper noun Jōruri.

[5] Uegusa Nobukazu, *Kinema Junpō Besuto Ten Zenshū (1960-1969)* (Tokyo: Kinema Junpō sha, 2000). 480.

[6]Shinoda, *Kakenukeru fūkei*, 242-243.

[7] Sato Tadao. *Nihon Eiga Shisoshi* (Tokyo: Sanichi Shobo, 1970), 373-74.

[8] Shinoda. *Kakenukeru fūkei*, 32-33.

[9]Morris, *The Nobility of Failure*, 389, note 6.112.

[10]Chikamatsu himself wrote much to support the notion of transcendence above the trials and pain of earthly existence, framed in explicitly Buddhist terminology that diminished the material *ukiyo* ("sad/floating world") as "a dream within a dream" (Trans. Keene, "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki", in *Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, 51). *Amijima* itself posits relief from mortal concern (and the risk of a bad rebirth) through the intercession of Amida Buddha, but only after death met with a sincere heart and a *nenbutsu* of praise upon one's lips: "People say that they who were caught in the net of Buddha's vow immediately gained salvation and deliverance." (Donald Keene trans., *Shinjū ten no amijima*, 208). Heine speaks of this performative subordination of the physical's value to the spiritual as a "sacred exchange or sacrifice made to procure a benefit from a supernatural source of power," ("Tragedy and Salvation in the Floating World," 380) drawing on, in *Amijima's* case, the recognition of Amida as the sole means to confirm the authenticity of their love.

[11] For example: the character Kansuke of *Battles at Kawanakajima (Shinshū Kawanakajima Gassen*, 1721), peerless in virtue, courage and his strategic mind is said to have the "spirit of Kusunoki Masashige,". (Gerstle, "The Battles at Kawanakajima," in *Chikamatsu: 5 Late Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 227.)

[12] Literally meaning "shattered jewel", or a self-sacrificing death to preserve one's vow of loyalty. In the Pacific War era, this tended to have the connotation of deaths in defense of the *kokutai* (national polity) and Emperor.

[13]Ibid. 341, note 2.8.

[14] Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 218.

[15]For a comprehensive list of the myriad potential forms of *shinjū* that serve to break the barrier between subject and embodiment of the ideal object, refer to Lawrence Rogers, "She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not: Shinjū and Shikidō Ōkagami," Monumenta Nipponica 49.1 (1994).

[16] Donald Keene. "Characteristic Responses to Confucianism in Tokugawa Literature," in *Confucianism and Tokugawa Culture*, ed. Peter Nosco (1984), 125.

[17] Shinoda, *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon*, 209.

[18] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 240.

[19] Interview with Shinoda, *Fūkei*, 69.

[20]Shinoda, *Kakenukeru fūkei*, 242.

[21] Shinoda, *Nihongo no goho de toritai*, 4.

[22] Phelps, "Bridging the Centuries"

[23] Although both play and film have the same title in Japanese, for ease of reference I will hereafter refer to the original Chikamatsu *Jōruri* play as "*Amijima*," whereas the Shinoda film will be referred to by the English title of "*Double Suicide*".

[24] Semimaru, the titular character of Chikamatsu's Jōruri adaptation of a famed Nō play, was an Imperial scion struck blind through his sinful lust and deception of his lovers. After achieving enlightenment, his sight is restored by the intercession of the bodhisattva Kannon. *The Battles of Coxinga*'s (*Kokusenya gassen*, 1715) lead Watōnai, later known as Coxinga, was the half-Japanese son of an exiled court minister of China's Ming Empire. After fighting his way across China, losing both his mother and sister in the process, his courage enables him to slay the evil minister Ri Toten and oust the Manchus from China.

[25] Keene, "Confucianism in Tokugawa Literature", 123.

[26] Chikamatsu Monzaemon, quoted by Hoizumi Ikan, as appears in *Early Modern Japanese Literature: an anthology, 1600-1900*, ed. Shirane Haruo. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 350.

[27] Shinoda, *Yami no naka no ansoku*, 306.

[28] Andrew Gerstle, "Hero as Murderer in Chikamatsu". *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Autumn 1996), 321.

[29] Shinoda, *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon*, 95-96.

[30]Both the play and the film make it clear that losing either Osan or Koharu serves as a mortal effacement of Jihei's simultaneous quest to reconcile social and erotic fulfillment. While the narrator declares that Jihei's love for Koharu is "stained so deep lye itself cannot cleanse it" (Keene, *Amijima*, Act I Scene I, 173) our male protagonist also declares that "Even if I become a beggar or an outcast and must sustain life with the scraps that fall from other people's chopsticks, I will hold Osan in high honor and protect her from every harsh and bitter experience. I feel so deeply indebted to Osan that I cannot divorce her." (Ibid., Act II, 195) The fact that both women are played by Iwashita Shima in *Double Suicide* reinforces their conception in relation to Jihei's frustrated desires, as well as demonstrating Shinoda's belief in a relatively greater fracturing of Japanese women's own essential humanity, as both erotic and social beings, demanded by traditional paradigms (Okamura, *Jigoku no ue ni hanami kana*, 254).

[31] Save for his fatherly responsibility to his two children, who Jihei fails to consider significant within the convoluted scope of his *giri* – a moral failing that seems to be swept away in the tidal wave of emotions that forms the third and final act of the play.

[32]Chikamatsu Monzaemon. *Shinjū ten no amijima.* Act I, Scene II. Translated by Donald Keene in "The Love Suicides at Amijima," from *Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 178.

[33] Andrew Gerstle. *Circles of Fantasy: Convention in the Plays of Chikamatsu.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[34] Gerstle. "Hero as Murderer in Chikamatsu", 329.

[35] Chikamatsu Monzaemon, quoted by Hoizumi Ikan, *Early Modern Japanese Literature: an anthology, 1600-1900*, 350.

[36] For further analysis of Chikamatsu's balancing act between artifice and realism, see Makoto Ueda's "The Sense of Honor as a Dramatic Principle" from *Literary and Art Theories in Japan* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1967), 186-195.

[37] Burch, *To the Distant Observer*, 49-50.

[38] See *Shinju Ten no Amijima*, Act I Scene I, and Act III Scene II for examples.

[39] Shinoda. *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon*, 137.

[40]Roland Barthes. *Empire of Signs*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 62.

[41] Nina Cornyetz, "Gazing Disinterestedly: Politicized Poetics in Double Suicide." *Differences.* Vol. 12, Iss. 3, 2001, 121.

[42] Interview with Shinoda Masahiro, *Fūkei*, 100.

[43]Japan Arts Council. "Types of Heads," An Introduction to the World of Bunraku. http://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/bunraku/en/contents/dolls/index.html Retrieved 3/5/2014.

[44] The suggested intertextual influence of *Sonezaki*'s events on *Amijima*'s protagonists will be further emphasized later in *Double Suicide*, when an escaping Koharu times the opening of the creaky front door of the brothel to the clacking of a nightwatchman's clappers. This image takes a much slighter watchman scene in *Amijima* and explicitly frames it within the actions of a suspenseful scene in Chikamatsu's earlier *shinjūmono*, where the heroine Ohatsu escapes her brothel by timing the door to a maid striking a flint. The

implication is clear: the actions of the *Double Suicide* protagonists are informed not only by *Amijima*, but by narrative tradition of indeterminate scope.

[45]Evidence for the translation of literary culture into real world phenomena can be found in direct relation to the *sewamono* of Chikamatsu himself. The "love suicide" was not only a theatrical trend, but its romanticization onstage led to a "cultural fad" in the latter half of the Genroku period, leading to increased numbers of young *chōnin* choosing to re-enact idealized images of double suicide to render, in their minds, their love as forever pure as that of the *shinjūmono* heroes. Commoners feeling encouraged to for love proved problematic even for a shogunate founded on the death-oriented ethos of *bushidō*, and in 1722 the *bakufu* banned *shinjūmono* plays and desecrated the bodies of those couples who committed the act. (Conrad Totman. "Aesthetics and the Rise of Ukiyo," 219.)

[46] Image taken from promotional poster from Sugimoto Theater's 2013 performance run of Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *Sonezaki Shinju*, http://sui-no-kai.jp/event/ Retrieved 3/5/2014.

[47] Shinoda. *Kakenukeru fūkei*, 242-3.

[48] See Keiko McDonald, "Giri, Ninjo and Fatalism in "Double Suicide"," *Film Criticism*; Spring 1981, 5.3.

[49] This adds a further layer of humanistic subtext by Shinoda, as the *kuroko* topple this symbol of the merciful bodhisattva Jizo that literally serves as the final source of support that keeps Jihei in this world. Even the divine is powerless before the will of the author. Yet religion is also implicated as a device through which Jihei's death is made final, as it is a Shinto *torii* gate from which he is hanged. In this powerful image, the gods are thus rendered powerless in practice, but critical to cultural narrative as symbolic stimuli for human action.

[50] Phelps, "Bridging the Centuries".

[51] Cornyetz. "Gazing Disinterestedly: Politicized Poetics in Double Suicide," 109.

[52] Phelps, "Bridging the Centuries".

[53] Cornyetz. "Gazing Disinterestedly: Politicized Poetics in Double Suicide," 111.

[54] Burch. *To the Distant Observer*, 32.

[55] Phelps. "The Closed World: The Films of Shinoda Masahiro."

[56]Phelps, "Bridging the Centuries."

[57] Desser, "Eros Plus Massacre,"179.

[58] Okamura, *Jigoku no ue no hanami kana*, 253.

[59] While it is uncertain whether this grave marker in truth bears the ashes of Kamiya Jihei beneath it or if it was established by zealous Jōruri fans at a later date, Shinoda has spoken of filming on-site next to the grave (*Kakenukeru fūkei*, 10) using terms that suggest being in the presence of the true Jihei's final resting place.

[60] Phelps. "The Closed World: The Films of Shinoda Masahiro"

[61] Keiko MacDonald. *Japanese Classical Theater in Films* (Rutherford: Farleigh and Dickinson, 1994), 214.

[62] Mellen, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 250.

[63] Chikamatsu. trans. Keene, *Shinjū ten no amijima*, Act 3, Scene 3, 207.

[64] Mellen, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 253.

[65] Shinoda goes into great detail about his bookish early childhood spent reading the Japanese canon from *Genji monogatari, Gikeiki* and on to Yoshikawa Eiji's classic samurai novel *Musashi* in his 2003 memoir *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon* and his 1970 interview with *Fūkei*.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER THE BLOSSOMING CHERRY TREES: THE HORROR OF THE SUBLIME

> "[Kurosawa and Mizoguchi] had a sense of Japanese tradition, but my films I approach more from a rational than mystical point of view, based on my own very real confrontation with a postwar society. And that's where I come from as a filmmaker."
> – Shinoda Masahiro, 2011[1]

Shinoda Masahiro's films are often made with the intent of depicting dominant Yamatoist definitions of Japanese culture as being founded on a historicized rationalization of the inherently irrational compulsion to violence. In *Double Suicide*, this was framed as a symbolic act of devotion (a lover's suicide) to the transcendent notion of the Sublime (the reconciliation of human desire and social harmony) that establishes and underlies the aesthetic concepts (*giri* and *ninjo*) which guide Japanese social response. These elements persist as the thematic core of Shinoda's mid-period independent work in his 1975 film *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees* (*Sakura no mori no mankai no shita*: Geiensha)[2]. As in *Double Suicide*, the film implies that the protagonist's obsessive search for ecstatic fulfillment of the violence already within him is a universal trait of the human condition, and Shinoda is on record as finding this to be the driving force of cultural development.[3] In *Cherry Trees*, Shinoda and screenwriter Tomioka Taeko adapt for the screen a novella by Sakaguchi Ango, famed author of the essay *On Decadence* (*Darakuron*, 1946), and the mutual interest of director and writer in the reactionary combination of passions essential to the human species and culturally-generated ideological constructs is on full display, with the events of the film serving primarily as allegory for the frustrated psychological journey of Japan's wartime generation.

Set at the height of Japan's classical age in the Heian era, *Cherry Trees* tells the story of a mountain bandit (Wakamatsu Tomisaburo), who kidnaps and takes an unearthly beauty (Iwashita Shima) for a wife after killing her husband in a robbery. Beginning with this very *Rashōmon*-like premise, Shinoda takes the humanism of Kurosawa and removes its moral component, for that too

is a historical construct. In contrast to Takashi Shimura's woodcutter in the earlier film, Shinoda's subject asserts his human agency by transcending ethical frameworks in pursuit of human fulfillment, instead of reasserting his place within them. The bandit's infatuation with his death-obsessed bride allows her to manipulate him into becoming a notorious serial killer, collecting the heads of the capital's elite for her sinister pleasures, not least of which is dramatization of court life by using the rotting trophies as puppets. Tipping his hand at his interest in the portrayal of this man's obsessive relationship with a sinister Sublime, Shinoda states that in both the source text of *Cherry Trees* and throughout Sakaguchi's other work, the author's narratives are:

> backgrounded with magnificent women who dwell in the underworld (*makai*), [and] the true emotions of the Platonic men who kneel before them are confessed… The woman is far too beautiful, and because of that this man's anxiety that his soul will be sucked away (*suiyoserarete*) will not cease.[4]

It is difficult for a viewer cognizant of the 1960's Japanese intelligentsia's dialogue with the problem of war responsibility not to consider that Sakaguchi/Shinoda's intent in the presentation of Iwashita's premodern femme fatale is in at least part directed as a damning portrayal of the Imperial system and the cultural infatuation with it as an ideology abjecting those who submit to it. The manifestation of absolute virtue embodied in the emperor was still cited as the primary source of "Japanese" identity by literati on both sides of the political spectrum. On the conservative side, Mishima Yukio's essay "In Defense of Culture" (*Bunka boei-ron*, 1969) described the Imperial virtues upon which a postwar revival of a secure Japanese identity would be predicated as being expressed in equal parts through the "chrysanthemum" of traditional arts and the "sword" of force.[5]. Akimoto Matsuyo's 1965 play *Kaison the Priest of Hitachi* (*Hitachibō Kaison*) argued that the solution for Japan's insurmountable identity crisis with postwar modernity could only be resolved by a mass taking of refuge in the native gods of Shinto, who represented "a flight into timelessness… eternal surcease [and] the irreversible end of historical creativity and responsibility."[6]

Meanwhile, Sakaguchi Ango himself dedicated much of his seminal essay *Darakuron* to deconstructing a "quintessentially Japanese and quite original" Imperial system imposed on the people within a celebration of Japanese art and moral virtue as "natural" phenomena.[7] Sakaguchi argued that entrenched cultural reverence for the Imperial line served as the expression of institutional fear of the destabilizing effect of individual liberty, and that while there was "no innate truth in it," it represents a "long history of innovations based on keen observations, and in this it has a profound significance that we cannot easily dismiss."[8] What these dialogues serve to evidence is that there was significant doubt in the postwar about whether the people of Japan could find a center of identity and national community as meaningful as the Imperial image had been prior to defeat. Shinoda's experience as an heir to this generation of artists serves to explain why Japanese critics have found that "it is clear that suspicions about why the Japanese until now have not been able to meaningfully address [the problem of Imperial responsibility] have taken deep root within Shinoda."[9] It is this society-wide denial of the extent of postwar trauma that Shinoda interrogates in *Cherry Trees*, as the director demands his audience confront what values it is that this bad-faith deflection of critical self-regard is intended to preserve.

While *Cherry Trees* takes on the fairy-tale tone of a *kaidan* ghost story, the narrative and alternation of beautiful and grotesque imagery in Shinoda's sole entry into the horror genre serves as a compelling allegory for issues resonating immediately with the cultural climate of Japan of the 1970s illustrated above. Further developing ideas presented in *Assassination* and *Double Suicide*, the film accomplishes its interrogations of human nature and conceptions of an absolute Sublime by rejecting placid acceptance of an organic state of culture while encouraging awareness of the intertwining of the historical and the mythical. While the film's formal construction is not as overtly Brechtian throughout as *Double Suicide*, Shinoda nevertheless continues to dismantle the illusions of drama by "constantly reminding the audience that it is merely getting a *report* of past events" in the form of the story unfolding before their eyes.[10]

The most Brechtian elements within *Cherry Trees* are established without delay in the first two sequences, which both act as strategies for the immediate recontextualization of the titular cherry blossoms as signifier. As in *Double Suicide*, the film begins with the introduction of a framing device that explicitly establishes that the presentation of the past to follow will remain within the contemporary experience of the viewing audience. This introduces in the audience awareness of authorial intent, always present but often intentionally unrecognized or masked in order to make a narrative more involving – a choice which Shinoda, vis-a-vis Brecht, finds leaves the door wide open for emotional exploitation. This structural framework, the first element of distantiation in this film, is established with extreme economy, taking less than a minute yet coloring the entire narrative which follows. The camera pans over crowds at a modern *hanami* celebration, the full bloom of the *sakura* trees presiding over a bright and festive atmosphere. This idyllic scene common in contemporary Japan sits in contrast with the portentous narration: "Coming out to enjoy the sight of the cherry blossoms and celebrating under the trees dates back to the Edo era. But a long, long time ago, the sight was considered frightening."

Shinoda overtly recreates the structure of classical *kaidanbanashi* (ghost story) storytelling, using an authoritative voice to lead us out of the modern Japan now established within the scope of the film's diegesis and towards the lurid, gruesome tale that occupies the rest of the film. The fact that the voice of the narrator clearly belongs to a young boy speaking in unnaturally conventionalized Japanese further establishes the fairy-tale feel of the story, and contrasts the violent and erotic content with the innocence implied by the storyteller. The juxtaposition seems a clear commentary by Shinoda on the air of quaint charm with which the abhorrent undertones of cultural myth are masked by aestheticization and the distance of time from their origin, and immediately puts the viewer on guard against taking any images seen for granted.

The question that Shinoda thus introduces through this monologue is "What about the cherry blossoms is frightening?" Throughout classical literature, the *sakura* are often beheld as an

image of transient beauty.[11] Their blossoms' brilliant hue and short lifespan before being scattered by the spring winds has become in poetry and narrative an apt and sentimental symbol for fleeting youth and glorious ideals too noble for a corrupt world. For centuries, literary allusions compared virtuous samurai heading to death with the cherry blossoms, and it was certainly this well-known image of martyrdom that came to mind when the Imperial Japanese Navy named a common model of *tokkotai* (suicide bomber) aircraft the *Ōka* (cherry blossom) during the Pacific War.[12] However, the strength of the presentation of such iconic images in this film comes by virtue of Shinoda's subversive demand throughout that images be re-evaluated in their historical meaning. The entire film to follow is at a basic level intended to suggest that what has been put forth as desirable in the modern era may have been widely considered appalling before centuries of cultural conditioning brought it into its current form.

With the introductory narration having already established an ominous overtone for the flowers which we have been told drive men to madness, the sequence immediately following shows the great formal pains taken by Shinoda to further reinforce these sakura with ugly images of uncanny terror. Takemitsu Toru's score which underlies these scenes combines ominous bass rumbles and shrieking string sections in seemingly anempathetic juxtaposition with the deep-field panoramas of spectacular blossoms, at least until their terrifying effect is exposed. The other musical element that should be noted is the use of the eerie *nōkan* flutes. This soundtrack decision, as well as reinforcing the period setting by aurally conflating the aesthetics of traditional theater with 20th century images of Japan's past, is emblematic of the recurrent use of theatrical imagery seen throughout the film that, as with *Double Suicide*, highlights the remediation of past culture through cinematic representation.

Nō theatre, often contrasted with Kabuki for its conventional use of signification rather than realistic movement and costuming to create drama, serves as an apt metaphor for the gesture towards abstracted notions of the ideal that Shinoda finds to be the engine of Japanese culture. Furthermore, given the film's deconstruction of Japanese manifestations of absolutism, the

emergence of Nō theater from Shinto *kagura* dances intended to dramatically manifest the presence of the gods among men is not likely to have been lost on either Shinoda or Takemitsu.[13] Thus, summoning Nō conventions to complement a cinematic narrative so reminiscent of the myth found in *kamimono* (god/spirit plays) and other modes of classical performance acknowledges parallel dimensions of story construction and of divine immanence present between this film and the ancient theater.

Backgrounded by Takemitsu's punctuated musical cues, Suzuki Tatsuo's camera captures the hysterics of the unfortunates trapped in the sakura grove in extreme slow motion, prolonging their agonies at the hands of the unseen force within the blossoms. (Figure 4.1) No one, no matter how pious or assured, is immune to the effect of the cherry trees – even a travelling group of Buddhist monks turns upon each other under their influence, striking at their brothers with their walking staffs in feral terror before scattering. (Figure 4.2) The unsettling artifice of these terrifying situations, for which we can find no sensible diegetic cause other than the storm of pink blossoms, is heightened by the utter lack of ambient diegetic sound in spite of the chaos onscreen. These formal reinforcements of our now-subverted image of the serene and beautiful cherry blossoms serve to train us as audience to treat them with a new apprehensive attitude foreign to the cultural epoch of 20th century Japan. We are now prepared to visit the malevolence underlying other long-glorified elements of the Japanese aesthetic.

Figure 4.1. A terrified *sakura* victim.

Figure 4.2. Monks turning upon their brothers.

The savage mountain bandit, known only as *sanzoku* in the credits, is embodied by Wakamatsu in a bare-bones manner as a man of primitive essence, for all intents and purposes the

personification of the uncultured state of human existence. He has no initial knowledge of society: entering the city, he awkwardly manhandles merchants' wares, is laughed at for his unkempt appearance, and shows that he has no concept of money's value when he pays his bill at a tea house by throwing down an excessively large pouch of coins. He is uncomplicated in his desires for food, shelter and sex, uninterested in social status or the needless trinkets of the nobles. Yet, as a brutish highwayman, he is shown to possess all the flaws attendant to the violent nature of our species, in keeping with Shinoda's conception of violence being the "fundamental enthusiasm of the human being"[14]. Shinoda makes clear that this uncultured man is intended to represent a sort of pre-ideological being as he both equates himself with and asserts dominance over nature: "Everything that you can see from here, all the mountains, all the trees, and all the valleys, and the creeks in those valleys – They're all mine," he declares pridefully to his new bride.[15]

The bandit's character arc is best considered as a transition from this original state to a civilized mode at Iwashita's behest – Shinoda externalizes this process in his clothing, as he gives up his fur scraps for the ill-fitting *suikan* robe of an urban gentleman. (Figure 4.3) The tension between his base desires and the demands of society is expressed when, after being dragged to the capital by his wife he bemoans his boredom amidst the pretentious spectacle of urban society, begging her to return to the forest with him. However, even after his eventual return to the forests from whence he came, he continues to wear the *suikan*; showing that for Shinoda, becoming 'de-cultured' is not an option. In Althusserian terms, the interpellated subject becomes a reproductive site of state ideology herself/himself by expressing the terms of her/his subjecthood as a matter of custom.[16] As we shall see, this is made clear in the bandit's case not only through his altered appearance, but also within his simultaneous role as both victim and victimizer. Even as his humanity is abjected and he suffers both displacement and physical violence to fulfill the desires of his beautiful bride, he becomes responsible for countless deaths as he answers her demands for "actors" for her twisted performances.

This outsider's course is established as soon as he is caught in the gaze of Iwashita's noblewoman. Our first vision of her is as she glares sharply at Wakamatsu almost in the style of a kabuki *mie* glance, punctuated by a sharp flute blast and the same eerie *Nō* chant as the images of the sakura seen previously. In a film that is largely structured of slow, tension-building long takes, the lightning-quick jump cut to Iwashita's face staring directly at the camera acts as a striking rhythmic disruption of the editing pattern, the impact eliciting an almost physical response from the viewer. (Figure 4.4) The bandit, after standing frozen in shock for a few moments at his experience of this sublime vision, becomes instantly infatuated with her, resolving to cut down her husband and his retainer in order to attain possession of this divine being. Even though her every aspect clashes with the unrefined essence of the bandit, he appears swept up in her radiance, immediately resolved to cast his own will and identity as the wilderness' authority aside in an attempt to attain her. Upon accepting him as a husband, the noblewoman immediately demands her groom carry her across the mountains to his home, forcing him to submit to her by acting in place of her lost mule. The woman asserts that this is to keep her feet from being soiled by the solid ground – pointedly suggesting an immaterial aspect of her existence that must be preserved.

Figure 4.3. Acculturation imaged through clothing

Figure 4.4. Interpellated by the ideal's gaze

Once they arrive at the dilapidated yet startlingly spacious hut in which he lives, she becomes distraught at the sight of his harem of wives, all as unwashed and uncultured as the bandit himself. Having already symbolically dominated her husband by treating him as livestock, she now demands he forsake all other attachments to maintain her affections, ordering him to slay

these dozens of women whom he has collected over the years. Although shocked at first, a shared glance appears to steel his resolve, and soon his sword finds its mark precisely upon the women at whom she gleefully thrusts her index finger in command: "If you miss even one, I'll reject you! (*hitori demo nigesashitara shouchi shinai wayo!*)" To be regarded on the same terms as these lesser, flawed and earthly women is utterly unacceptable to this otherworldly being, so much so that their mere presence is insulting. All other bonds of obligation, all former passions, must be obliterated for him to possess Iwashita's icon of beauty. Shinoda captures the carnage in a continuous series of long panning takes, holding our view on the violent scene even as the camera films from behind trees and through greenery, as if aware that witness of this slaughter arising within a memory from the past is taboo to the modern viewer's gaze.

Even more so than her husband, Iwashita's character is objectified in high order throughout this film: she is never given a name, nor is she ever given a title beyond "Wife (*nyobō*)." Much like the sakura image beheld by modern Japanese, it is her beauty that defines her first and foremost: "You're too beautiful. (*anta utsukushi sugiru*)," are Wakamatsu's first words to the woman. The parallel between the noblewoman's pure eroticism and the bloom of the sakura (which we by now thoroughly associate with the uncanny) are visually reinforced throughout: her moans as she allows Wakamatsu to take her sexually are cross-cut with and superimposed by time-lapsed images of the flowers bursting open. (Figure 4.5)

Figure 4.5. Parallel images of sinister eroticism.

There is a strong visual emphasis on the sultriness of the noblewoman, but it is always concomitant with reinforcement of her insidious nature. Despite a life spent in an isolated and decrepit mountain *yashiki* and abandoned temples, her appearance never seems to degrade to the level of her surroundings. In fact, her magnificence only grows more splendid as her husband robs passing maidens of their kimono and hair ornaments to satisfy her vanity, heightening the sense that this being, whatever she may represent, exists above the squalor of the material world while sustaining her regal image by consuming its wealth. Even as she sends her husband forth to kill and rob to attain the material offerings of tribute she demands, she spurns him when he tries to embrace her with hands bloodied in his quest to serve her – a possible reference to Shinto ritual taboos concerning purity. The impossibility of her unsoiled appearance in contrast to the lowness of her circumstances throughout the film recalls correlations drawn between beauty and authoritarian power within a wealth of 20th century discourse, as Nina Cornyetz aptly summarizes:

> It is of course Walter Benjamin who is most famous for cautioning us about the *inflexible* purification of domains that lurks at the core of fascist ideology. In her critique of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, Susan Sontag has reminded us that fascism appeals to the masses not by virtue of its brutality, but with its beautiful images and sentiments.[17]

Indeed, although brutality is unquestionably a component of the noblewoman's sway over the bandit, it is not as an outlet for his aggression or sadism that he values her. Her unreal beauty is what he desires, and even if he fails to comprehend why the violence is necessary, the fact that it sustains her presence in his life appears to be enough for him to continue in submission to her will. Throughout the film, Iwashita serves as an object of tribute for the mountain man, and his rites of devotion towards her grow to necessarily incorporate both violence and acquisition in order for her to be satisfied. As we shall see, not only material markers of power and wealth, but also the man's self-determination over the expression of his innate violence are required to sustain and possess this hidden object of beauty.

The perversion that this woman thrusts upon the simple bandit who worships her is thus not intended to criticize the immorality or insanity of a particular individual. Shinoda is not interested in interrogating the morality of human individuals here or in any other of his films: he seems to reserve equal parts skepticism and sympathy for the human species as flawed beings. Rather, this filmmaker finds it more productive and more appropriate to the Japanese worldview to frame his films as a discussion of the effect of contingently arising *circumstance*s on drawing forth subject response. "European films are based upon human psychology, American films upon action and the struggles of human beings, and Japanese films upon circumstance. Japanese films are interested in what surrounds the human being."[18] Here we find another parallel with Brecht, who stated that the question that must seek to be answered by any truly revolutionary theater is "always how a given person is going to act in a specified set of circumstances and conditions."[19] The violence of individuals is not on trial in *Cherry Blossoms*, but rather the cynical co-option of this innate expression of humanity which effaces the individual to confirm an illusory absolute.

What the ambiguous nature of Iwashita's villainess shows in *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees* is that it is ideology that directs violence away from its basic state as a communication of material needs and towards the irrational, which stimulates the "madness" of acting against our own interests in service of ideas, of things which are not of our materiality. When Wakamatsu threatens to leave the capital and her behind, Iwashita consents (albeit with the intent to drag him back later): "Of course I'm coming with you. I can't survive a day without you." Her beauty is only existent as long as someone is there to serve it through sacrifice, to embrace it, in spite of its contradiction of all sensory reason, as an embodied presence that can offer elusive fulfillment.

The target of criticism which lies under the scrutiny of Shinoda's camera in this film is, however, not merely limited to the political represented in the Imperial institution. As seen in both *Assassination*'s Kiyokawa and the lover of *Double Suicide*, the filmmaker's eye seeks to penetrate to the core of the sense of pathos cultivated through the Japanese arts, which diminishes the subject before the absolute and then lionizes the resulting anguish as an offering to the

Sublime. In multiple scenes of *Cherry Trees*, we witness a genealogical progression through Japan's sites of cultural influence as Iwashita, who we initially see dressed in the colorful but relatively nondescript *kimono* of the Heian elite, reinvents herself by donning the costume of whichever victim her husband had last stripped. There is often a religious dimension to the outfits she chooses, beginning with the red hakama and white kimono of a *miko* shrine maiden, a figure who acts overtly in service to the divine. (Figure 4.6) In a following scene, this look is cast off in favor of that of the *shirabyōshi*, a female dancer whose function blurs the lines between popular entertainment and religious ritual. (Figure 4.7) Finally, we witness her dressed in the outfit of an early courtesan, predecessor to the Edo *yūjo* of the sort lionized in the image of *Double Suicide*'s Koharu. (Figure 4.8) However, it is key to note that the robes in which the noblewoman adorns herself are not hers, but stolen. A lingering shot of the naked, weeping *miko* from whom her husband had robbed the Shinto costume ensures that this disturbing impression of violent appropriation of the religious image resonates. (Figure 4.9)

Shinoda makes overt nods to this chameleon-like beauty's role in delivering and generating a specific, absolutist form of culture, initially through religious ritual (the *miko*) and then through the increasingly populist forms of theatrical performance (the *shirabyōshi*) and *ukiyo* literature (the courtesan). The ties between these performance-based sites of cultural dissemination is overtly tied to the written arts through the *imayo uta* she sings upon claiming each new guise. The poem itself is rife with the imagery of transcendence: "Buddha is all around us, we just can't see him with our eyes, but at dawn, when humans make no sound, we can faintly see him in our dreams."[20]

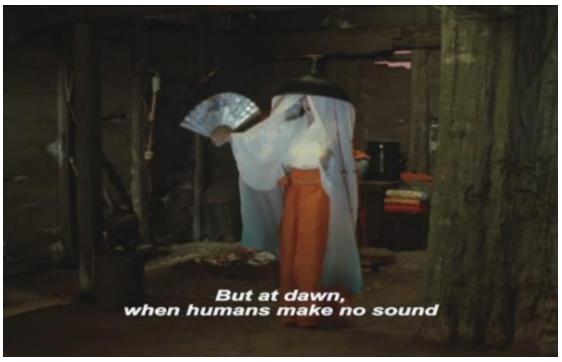

Figure 4.6. Cultural dissemination: *Miko*…

Figure 4.7. …Evolving to *shirabyōshi*…

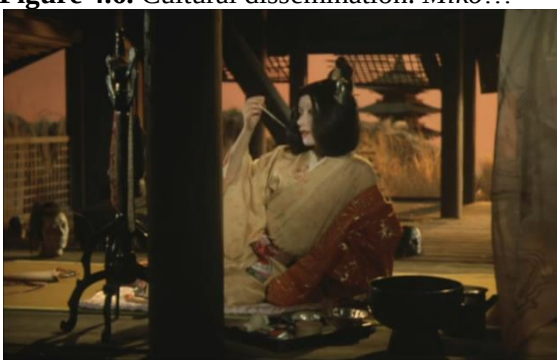

Figure 4.8. … Evolving to *yūjo*.

Figure 4.9. Victimization / cultural appropriation.

The deliberate choice of this selection from the Emperor Go-Shirakawa's 12th century *Ryōjin Hishō* anthology not only reinforces the value placement of a distant, immaterial beauty above human society, but also subtly ties Iwashita to the institution of the monarchy.[21] Shinoda theorizes that the Japanese poem represents one of the earliest sites of cultural propagation of Imperialist doctrine, starting from the 10th century: "That the Imperial House was directly involved in compiling poem anthologies from the *Kokinshu* to the *Shinkokinshu* is something that can't be overlooked." [22] Iwashita's repeated and compelling musical refrain thus directly implicates the emotional appeal of art in disseminating the absolutist ideologies upon which the Imperial system of rule is sustained.

Artistic convention is elsewhere brought to task for its role in culturally legitimizing repugnant violence through the recurrent images of Iwashita's use of the severed heads reluctantly collected by her husband in the dramatic recreation of court intrigues. The association with classical theatricality in these scenes is explicit in the manner through which Iwashita presents dialogue. Her voice rises to a stage register, seemingly mimicking the cadence of a

chanter and the mannered rhetoric of the theatrical stage as she literally puppets the moldering heads brought to her by her husband, utterly unperturbed by their rot as she is swept up into her macabre storytelling. (Figure 4.10, 4.11) As a matter of course, she rejects the heads of commoners for these performances, demanding the "big, fat heads" of the elites from her husband. Her stories, in line with the classical traditions of drama and narrative, necessarily begin with the upper echelons of Heian society.

It is not only the inherently disturbing behavior of making a game of playing with the dead that renders her inhuman during these scenes, but also the liberties with which she seems to rewrite the lives of the people who have died for her pleasures. This is illustrated in the disjuncture we witness between the actual interactions between two of her pre-mortem "actors" in one sequence, and how Iwashita redefines their relationship in a following scene. In the first sequence, the bandit is hiding in the roof of the Rokujo Princess's mansion, spying as a gentleman caller enters the dark room and begins to undress her. The Princess at first gladly goes along with who she assumes is her lover, her very human expressions of sexual pleasure contrasting with the mannered literary depiction of a sexually disengaged Heian court lady. (Figure 4.12) Then, a stray beam of moonlight brightening the room, she is jarred out of her ecstasy by the realization that the man she is in bed with is an unfamiliar middle-aged chancellor. Naturally, she reacts with unambiguous horror after realizing this rapist had all along been pretending to be the true paramour she had been expecting to call on her. (Figure 4.13)

Suddenly Iwashita's husband jumps down to slay both at this peak moment of drama, violently ending the true narratives of their lives as humans – unequivocally transforming them from subjects with interiority and agency into objects that can be manipulated without resistance or objection. The slash which ends the princess' life leads to a jump cut to Iwashita dramatizing a continuation of the lives taken seconds before with romantic flourish:

> "The Rokujo princess finds herself unable to hate the Chancellor. She cries in sadness over her fate, and becomes a nun. The chancellor follows her to the

convent, then violates her. The princess wants to kill herself, but the Chancellor sweet-talks her out of it."

Figure 4.10. Putting words in dead mouths

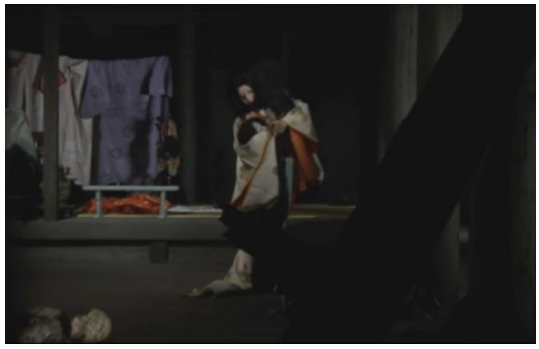

Figure 4.11. Rewriting the past of now-objectified subjects

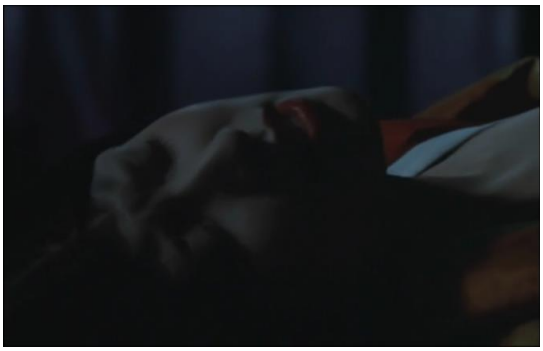

Figure 4.12. The Rokujo princess's passion…

Figure 4.13. …gives way to the horror of masculine violation

The words that the wife puts into the mouths of the characters represent a storybook reality where the princess's attempts to resist masculine violation are reframed as unspoken desire simply masked by concern over moral propriety. Our personification of absolutist compulsion feels no shame in appropriating the narratives of actual human lives to suit her values, editing, emphasizing, and taking total liberties when no protest from the dead is possible. The truth of human experience is masked as a result of this violent act, the dignity of the dead effaced in support of a cultural ideal.

The vile noblewoman carries out her storytelling in a fashion directly recalling the glorification in classical-era texts, most notably the 11th century *Genji Monogatari*, of what Japanese feminists such as Setouchi Jakuchō have asserted amounts to rape softened by the mannered presentation of Heian court lifestyle.[23] It is certainly ironic that Iwashita's feminized

icon of beauty exercises agency in perpetuating a male gaze in diminishing the trauma of Japanese gender relations through classical narrative. However, it is a choice that is not wholly unjustified when considering that a millennium of similar glorification of the Court darling and womanizer Hikaru Genji began via the brush of Murasaki Shikibu.

The film's reference to Iwashita's construction of a *Genji*-like scenario is apt for its themes, considering the clear role the novel had in the formation and cementing of Imperial civilization as the idealized definition of Japanese identity through the medieval and early modern periods. Conrad Totman notes that in the Tokugawa period, the artistic virtue of *yūgei* (defined by him as "polite accomplishments," or the traditional aesthetic ideals of broadly cultured samurai) was instrumental in disseminating notions of an idealized Imperial civilization and reinforcing Shinto scholarship during a period of cultural intermingling between the *samurai* elites and the bourgeois *chōnin*:

> This artistic output [of the 17th century], which became part of the yūgei repertoire, transformed the courtly aesthetic into the property of a much broader public, thereby spreading and consolidating public awareness of Japan's cultural legacy and suggesting that one could find in it inspiration for the present. The works established a close linkage between that legacy and the imperial court and thus broadened public consciousness of the imperial heritage, even as the bakufu worked to minimize the court's social visibility and political influence.[24]

A court-inspired artistic culture reinforced over centuries remained to leave behind images of a magnificent classical civilization tied to the primordial divine and model its ideologies for future generations, even if those generations were only abstractly informed on the subject of their reigning monarch. Furthermore, even if commoners had not been exposed to works of the classic canon themselves, a culture of literary allusion and intertextuality made avoiding exposure to myths of Japan's golden age difficult. Caddeau uses the example of the *Genji Monogatari*'s influence to indicate that:

> by the eighteenth century, *Genji* had become the subject or source of inspiration for works of prose, poetry, drama, visual art, and even the erotic that extended well beyond the exclusive domain of aristocrats, clergy and scholars to include the world of merchants, artisans, commoners, and prostitutes.[25]

Caddeau elsewhere notes that the themes and aesthetics of *Genji* as a point of cultural reference for images of the monarchy across broad demographics became useful to such late Tokugawa nationalist theorists as Motoori Norinaga in fostering particularized conceptions of Japanese identity:

> Norinaga's argument was based on the assumption that *Genji* was a sacred repository of Japanese culture. To favorably appraise *Genji* was to demonstrate one had inherited certain values and attitudes, unique to the Japanese race, from the ancestors of the country's shared culture. This theory of emotional, cultural and aesthetic sensitivity, often referred to as Norinaga's theory of *mono no aware*, argued against the dominance of non-native ideologies.[26]

There is a clear basis for a filmmaker like Shinoda to consider that the abstract ideals of Japanese identity have been reinforced in a manner that bolsters the exalted consideration of the Imperial figure. As *Cherry Trees* illustrates throughout its 95-minute runtime, Japanese culture both high and low is undeniably dressed in the trappings of the Imperial court and its ideologies. The greater issue now becomes whether the subject, once enraptured of this compelling promise of existential security and identity, can continue to exist once the mask is pulled away to reveal the monster lurking behind the beauty.

It is in the final scene of the film that the unsettling metaphor of the director's experience of his nation's struggle to disassociate from transcendent ideals as a basis of existential worth comes into a terrifying clarity. Having suffered through tortures at the hands of the city magistrate's gang of city guards (in truth all "reformed" criminals), the bandit escapes and returns to his wife in the decaying temple in which they shelter, declaring that he doesn't belong in the capital and will return to the mountains. Iwashita, all crocodile tears and cloying affection, agrees to his wishes to avoid being abandoned among the ruins of Japan's past. Upon their exit from Kyoto, however, she immediately tasks her handmaiden to "maintain" the decrepit home in expectation of a return not long after – repudiating the repentance she displays for forcing her husband into their murderous lifestyle. As the couple leaves the capital amidst the dancers and clowns that seem to be incessantly frolicking on the temple steps, Shinoda undercuts the festive

mood of the drums by juxtaposing it with the viewer's final vision of the capital: a sudden cut to the unseen abattoir constructed in its heart under the vile guidance of Iwashita's character. This is accomplished via a meticulously composed front-facing still shot of the skulls littering the space where the woman once sat, the grim *memento mori* lit low-key with the faded image of a white cockerel painted on a *fusuma* behind. (Figure 4.14)

This weathered icon of the rooster summoned as a backdrop not only here but repeatedly throughout the film, is only partly a reference to the decaying artistic culture among which Iwashita thrives. Its regular placement behind Iwashita is summoned with pointed symbolic intent, representative of both restoration of power and ritual sacrifice in a fashion distinctly tied to the roots of Japanese myth. A white cockerel's raucous crowing was supposed to have been used to call forth the Sun Goddess and Imperial progenitor Amaterasu-no-omikami from her hiding place in early Shinto legends.[27] This icon's presence as centerpiece to the final shot reinforces the implication of an imminent revival of a divine presence at the center of culture, suggested in the wife's dialogue to the handmaiden. Simultaneously, the image of expected restoration is tied to the death-obsession driving the noblewoman's actions via the piles of skulls that appear to have been laid before it in tribute – suggesting the morbid cost of restoring the absolute ideal represented by her to a central place within the seat of political power that is the capital.

Wakamatsu's bandit's expectation of an uncomplicated return to the mountain roots he seeks to nostalgically reinhabit is problematized quickly by Shinoda, for he soon finds himself once more bearing the burden of his sinister bride upon his back. This repetition of the first journey to the cabin continues the sequence of images of this woman's restoration and revival, which renders false Iwashita's repeated promises of a return to the idyllic lifestyle before their venture to the capital. Even as he is gasping for breath under her weight, Wakamatsu seems lost in ecstasy at this delusion of a romanticized past, and replies: "It's almost like a dream (*yume no yō da na*)." And indeed, Wakamatsu's platitudinous words foreshadow the ultimate message of the denouement – for as soon as they enter the sakura forest, the illusory nature of this man's

obsession with his beautiful and regal bride is revealed. Shinoda's camera, as always, peers from behind the trees as the scattering blizzard of cherry petals falls upon them, until Iwashita suddenly turns her gaze away from her husband to stare directly into the camera – a qunitessentially Shinoda-esque confrontation with the modern viewer that violently inserts her presence into our reality. (Figure 4.15)

Figure 4.14. Aftermath and promise of return

Figure 4.15. Uncanny engagement with the viewer

As the wind rises and blossoms slowly collect upon both of them, her husband's smile disappears from his face before he turns to take in the toothy smile of a ugly, *yamanba*-like demon perched upon his back, its hands prepared to tighten around his neck. Horrified, he strangles the beast amidst the piles of sakura, only to find once he has opened his eyes the body of his gorgeous bride smiling serenely up at him in death. A top-down medium shot of the two encircled by branches captures the man as he slowly reaches out to the corpse being swiftly covered up by the blossoms, and he hears her voice emerge from motionless lips, snapping out a line she has repeated often within this film: "Don't touch me! (*sawaranai yo!)*" Failing to heed her command, he extends his hand, and the instant before the bandit's hand can touch her face to confirm her existence, she vanishes, without leaving even an impression behind in the banks of fallen sakura. As the panicking man frantically sweeps the area where his lover once occupied, as if unwilling to believe his senses, he too fades into nothingness. (Figure 4.16) The final shot of the film ushers us back into the real world with a bleak and contemplative image: a 20-second long take of the last petals falling from the trees of the sakura grove, ominously backgrounded by

a drawn-out bass tone from Takemitsu. In deliberate contrast to the distantiating framework of the introduction, the formal denouement serves to reinforce the emotional impact of the narrative, leaving the viewer with a lingering sense of dread, perhaps not so different from that felt by the victims of the cherry grove.

Figure 4.16. The malicious creature behind the sublime image is revealed and slain, only to revert again to an ethereal beauty as her husband's nostalgic desire creeps in - "sucking away his soul" as the bandit vanishes amidst his desperate attempt to recover her.

It is this scene in which the central thrust of Shinoda's cultural philosophy and criticism of the aesthetic values of the Imperial Japanese culture strikes home with confidence. The journey of Wakamatsu, a cipher for pure human impulse and natural state of violent, desirous being, is primarily one of experiencing the horror of confrontation with acts committed in the name of a destructive ideal of aesthetic value. While he is hardly a paragon of virtue in the beginning of the story, his crimes appear to be motivated by rational needs, until he encounters an objectified beauty coded with many of the same images historically used in Japanese culture to rationalize the majesty of the Imperial house to the masses. The man's traumatized reaction following the

removal of the hyper-aestheticized object of his violent tribute relates to Japan's postwar experience as described by Shinoda:

> The *ningen sengen* and the photograph of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, General MacArthur, lined up next to the Showa Emperor had the result of forcing the people to painfully confront the new circumstances of Japan. I thought of the people who would have discarded their lives in a heartbeat for the Emperor. A horrible notion arose in me – Hadn't we all become monsters to serve the Emperor and defend the sacred homeland? This *ressentiment* persists somewhere deep within my breast, even to this day.[28]

With an awareness of this director's self-confessed struggle with guilt coloring our reading, it is easy to find parallels between Shinoda's structuring of the final sequence and the trauma of Japan's unconditional surrender and the *ningen sengen.* As with the people of Japan and their loss of the existential purpose of service to the Emperor and the nation chosen of the *kami*, the object of desire for which our bandit has thrown away his individual will has vanished before his eyes. This leaves him in disbelief at his sudden and terrifying liberation and its accompanying demand for personal responsibility over his actions. This is the compromise that every human society has made with the divine, Shinoda claims. In order to impose order on our world, we surrender self-determination of our values to the untouchable authority of that which lies beyond our reach, leaving ourselves vulnerable to the appropriation of the image of the absolute by a political that would render us into its allies in exploitation:

> The world was something very fearful to the prehistoric or ancient people, and so they had to think in terms of gods. Gradually they came to realize that the world was composed of the people themselves, not of gods, and the first to realize this were those in power. Then, in order to protect their authority, which was absolute, they thought of making use of the power of the gods by deifying their authority and granting it the power of the gods.[29]

The allegory of the bloodthirsty yet cultured woman and the all-too-human bandit in place, it becomes the viewer's next task to question what the sakura and the terrifying "madness" they engender truly represent. As established previously, the falling cherry blossoms have long been a symbol of death and transience, and this metaphor remains in full effect in *Cherry Trees* to subvert the traditionally positive spin on the pathos ascribed to this icon in literature, The insanity

we see experienced by the poor souls who wander through the falling petals is perhaps best considered as the horror of clarity, a terrifying recognition of the vulnerability to change and degradation of all things postulated to be of the absolute; of the awareness that all things must pass. If we read the film as an overt commentary on the war era, as an initial *Kinema Junpō* review did, the bloom and scatter of the *sakura* might be read as the fate of the *kokka* (national household) during the 15-year war, as nationalist dreams flowered and then collapsed under the weight of their own impossibility.[30] As Shinoda stated, the man's object of desire (encapsulated in both the bloom and the woman), offering both a perfect sexual and aesthetic fulfillment, is too beautiful to exist, and yet until he directly witnesses the fading of this quite Japanese vision of the sublime he is trapped within his nostalgic illusions of an inviolable and unchanging ideal.

Shinoda writes of the consequences of this idealization: "Humans want to confirm beauty by asserting a form upon it. It is from then that beauty escapes us. This is what establishes a belief in people that beauty does not exist, and the despair over this is very deep."[31] In her final moments after "death", she forbids his attempt to touch her, and once this prohibition is tested, her place in this reality disappears. This seems is meant to suggest that she, standing in for the glories of Imperial culture, exists merely as a delusion, but one imposed from without (brought into the domain of the forest by the unfortunate aristocrats) which continues to be recognized by others (as shown through the maid's acknowledgement of her). She is a material crystallization of a disseminated ideal, able to manifest as material and be perceived, and yet she is rendered insubstantial upon an attempt to violate the boundary between the sacred and forbidden ideal and the contingent and sensory real.

The untouchable beauty that Wakamatsu's character has strived for, and for which he has committed unspeakable acts, is shown, through the conspicuous presence of the falling petals, to be subject to the forces of our material reality, falsifying her as a perfect absolute. From the perspective of Shinoda and other 1960's literati who had personally been inculcated with the ideology of the Imperial state, an allegorical representation of the *tennō* institution as a demon

disguised as an unreal beauty must have seemed disturbingly apt amidst the need to reconcile the brutality of the 1930s and 40s. The violence Iwashita demands as proof of Wakamatsu's love falls neatly in line with the supposed beliefs of early samurai loyalists such as Kusunoki Masashige, and even in the 1960s ultranationalists such as Mishima Yukio were openly declaring that the it was the divine emperor who sanctified the violence inherent as a part of *bushidō*, which was necessary to revive in order to recover the lost spirituality of the Japanese nation.[32]

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this final scene is that, even after his recognition of his bride's evil and impossible existence, the bandit refuses to admit to the reality before his eyes. Rather than return to where he came from or otherwise rise to the demands of a life without her to provide meaning, he instead in desperation throws himself upon the spot where she once lay. The manner in which his body slowly fades, leaving only the wind whipping through the desolate grove suggests his dissipation amidst a masochistic desire to recover the creature that had so thoroughly abused his faith and devotion. The sense of frustration expressed by Shinoda through this image of willful denial of one's own victimization by a suspect ideology is palpable. It is hard not to recognize it as a thinly veiled depiction of the nostalgic revisitation of Imperialist ideologies for a source of identity. "Our gods were crushed with the atomic bombs and democracy, but they survived as well," Shinoda once said to Joan Mellen[33] – and it is in this image of the poor savage clawing at the earth to find nothing that he illustrates this notion. We are shown that it is in human minds, in attachment to the problematic promise of fulfillment that retrogressive beliefs in the timeless and infallible continue to live on through us and effect the shape of our lives to come.

Much scholarship on the immediate postwar period reveals that the possibility of the forced dismantling of the Imperial institution by either the Allied Powers or leftist politicians in the Japanese Diet was a true fear for many in the mainstream. This continued to be the case even as revelations of both the Emperor's non-divinity and the gut-churning extent of the Imperial Army's war crimes on the Asian continent came to light. Sodei Rinjirō cites two polls on the

issue of retaining the Imperial institution taken within six months of surrender: the December 9, 1945 *Yomiuri hōchi shimbun* recorded 95% of respondents in support of the Imperial system, and a January 23, 1946 *Mainichi Shimbun* poll recording 92% in favor.[34] Even following the shocking admission of the *tennō*'s humanity that was the Jan. 1, 1946 *ningen sengen*, we see that the percentage of the population who believed that the emperor system was a positive force in Japan had dropped only by a mere three percent, attesting to the resilience and power of national myth.

Much as our protagonist in *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees* seems to have his mind swept clear of the memory of his bride's exploitation, John Dower illustrates the communal amnesia that seemed to have occurred as the Japanese majority sought to justify the evident atrocities of the war era by reinstating images of martial valor and patriotism as the highest aspirations worth a human cost:

> References to being a "sacrifice" (*gisei*) appeared frequently in the writings of the men condemned to death in the lower level trials. Such a man might see himself as "a noble sacrifice for the country," or a sacrifice for the nation "paid in blood," or a sacrifice "for defeat" or "for the reconstruction of Japan" or "for the race," or more hopefully yet for "world peace."… Just as Hirohito had been absolved of wrongdoing for war responsibility, so now accused war criminals were implicitly forgiven for whatever they might have done in the cauldron of war.[35]

The self-serving agenda of the militarists and Imperial advisors was made clear through the postwar trials and forced admissions to the Japanese people of atrocities, institutionalized persecution, and concerted misinformation campaigns designed to keep the populace fighting long after defeat was assured. In spite of this, the hold of an aestheticized *kokka* image conflated with "traditional" virtues on the hearts of the majority of Japanese seemed impervious to the challenges levied against them by the outside world and the domestic Left. Their conflation with Japanese identity, it seemed, was so thorough that to deny them was to deny one's own being as a member of the national community. As Cornyetz summarizes, "the incessant binding of all

Japanese aesthetics, transhistorically, to the premodern prevents movement towards "something else.""[36]

It is this problem that Shinoda expresses in his depiction of the fate of Wakamatsu's bandit. We have established that by confronting the immateriality of the beauty to which he has been wedded, he has committed the great taboo of attempting to bring the absolute into the mortal realm and thus implicitly making her subject to its laws of conduct and accountability. But so much of this man's self has been invested in satisfying this being that when she disappears, it is as if she takes his identity with him. Thus, his desperation at the end of the film becomes perhaps not simply a display of uncontrollable animalistic desire, but an act of Self-preservation. This fear that being denied the absolute value of the past will prove fatal to the national community is what Shinoda posits has rendered postwar Japanese society frozen in place and searching for a nonexistent past: a flight to nostalgia which at the time of this film was manifesting in the ethnic particularism of *nihonjinron* discourse that emerged following the "Economic Miracle's" positive effect on national self-worth in the 1960s and 1970s.[37]

The liberty that was felt at the moment of the *gyokuon hōsō* (Emperor Hirohito's 1945 radio announcement of Japan's surrender) comes at too high a price for most; namely, the recognition of one's free will and personal responsibility alongside the horrors of one's past is too much to bear. And yet, for a nation to define its existential worth through its relation to an absolute image ensures that even success by the material standards of a capitalist order will provide little satisfaction. This is the contradiction that emerges for a nation that has been trained to guide itself only by the sun – as much as staring into that unearthly body has caused pain and blindness, the loss of orientation after night comes means that Japan is constantly searching for the light on the horizon. And so, much as Wakamatsu fades to nothingness despite manic efforts to recover his love, so is a modern Japan continuing to scrabble at the cherry blossoms in pursuit of a beautiful dream of the Sublime - in very real danger of losing sight of its own materiality and vanishing from the earth.

Notes

[1] Phelps. "The Closed World: The Films of Shinoda Masahiro"

[2] *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees*, Hulu Streaming Video, (1975; New York: Criterion, 2012). Dialogue cited is my own translation unless otherwise acknowledged. All images included in this chapter are screen captures from this pressing of the film unless otherwise acknowledged.

[3] Mellen. *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 245, 251.

[4] Shinoda, *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon*, 54.

[5] Shillony, *Enigma of the Emperors.* 245.

[6] David G. Goodman, *Japanese Drama and Culture in the 1960s: The Return of the Gods* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 118.

[7] Sakaguchi Ango. "Discourse on Decadence," from *Literary Mischief: Sakaguchi Ango, Culture, and the War*. Ed. James Dorsey. and Doug Slaymaker (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 175-185.

[8] Ibid. 178.

[9] Okamura, *Jigoku no ue no hanami kana*, 67.

[10] Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, 115.

[11] Evidence of this image's strong reinforcement throughout classical literature can be seen in the use of the phrase "the first cherry blossoms at Yoshino (*yoshino no hatsuzakura*)" as shorthand for the epitome of grandeur and loveliness. (Susan K. Matisoff, trans., "Chikamatsu's *Semimaru*", from *The Legend of Semimaru: Blind Musician of Japan*. 1978)

[12] Morris, *The Nobility of Failure*, 277.

[13] Morisue Yoshiaki, *Chuusei no Shaji to Geijutsu* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Hirobumikan, 1941), 196.

[14] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 236.

[15] It is however made clear, in true Shinoda fashion, that these boasts are nothing but the mere hubris of humanity that cannot accept not being the master of its own fate; the bandit gasps these words out with his new wife mounting him, pointing to a landscape obscured to the viewer by vegetation, and is instantly humbled by his inability to catch a bird he had claimed as part of his domain of authority. As always, mankind is inextricably a part of nature but never above it.

[16] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 41-42.

[17] Nina Cornyetz. *The Ethics of Aesthetics in Japanese Cinema and Literature.* New York: Routledge, 2007. 5.

[18] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 242.

[19] Esslin, *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, 118.

[20] In the original Japanese: "*Hotoke wa tsune ni imase domo / utsusu naran to awarenai / hito no oto senu akatsuki ni / honoka ni yume ni mi tamafu."*

[21] "Kyō no kotoba- [2004nen 01gatsu]" Otani University. http://www.otani.ac.jp/yomu_page/kotoba/nab3mq0000000kt7.html Retrieved 2/10/2014.

[22] Shinoda. *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon.* 219.

[23] Setouchi has received both acclaim and criticism for her outspoken criticism of the conduct of male characters in Genji and her rejection of the notion that the male protagonists of the 11th century work should be figures of admiration. A New York Times interview on the topic of her 1999 translation of the classic novel featured the following conversation with avant-garde author turned Buddhist nun: "There was nothing very cultured about Genji's affairs (for all the flowery language) since they always began with what [Setouchi] calls "forced sex." "It was rape, really," Setouchi says. "But then women of that era couldn't hope for much better. Relationships began when a man broke into their chambers and ended when he stopped coming around. And remember that all marriages were arranged by the parents and used as political leverage." (Kaori Shoji, "Setouchi Jakucho Takes Japan Back 1,000 Years", *The New York Times*, 1/23/1999, http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/23/style/23iht-nun.t.html Retrieved 1/17/2014)

[24] Conrad, Totman. "Aesthetics and the Rise of Ukiyo," from *Early Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 192.

[25] Patrick W. Caddeau, *Appraising Genji: Literary Criticism and Cultural Anxiety in the Age of the Last Samurai*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. 4.

[26] Ibid. 3.

[27] *Nihon Shoki*, chapter 1, passage 38.

[28] Shinoda. *Watashi ga ikita futatsu no nihon.* 41.

[29] Bock, *Japanese Film Directors*, 239.

[30] Takiguchi, Michihiro. "Masahiro Shinoda no shiteki tema no tenkai." *Kinema Junpō* .

[31] Shinoda, *Yami no naka no ansoku*. 164.

[32] Roy Starrs. *Deadly Dialectics*: *Sex, Violence and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. 169.

[33] Mellen, Joan. *Voices from the Japanese Cinema.* Liveright, 1975. 239.

[34] Sodei, Rinjirō. *Dear General MacArthur*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 67.

[35] Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat.* 517-518.

[36] Cornyetz. *The Ethics of Aesthetics in Japanese Film and Literature*. 171.

[37] Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 557.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

> A valuable work, a powerful work, at least, is one which challenges codes, overthrows established ways of reading or looking, not simply to establish new ones, but to compel an unending dialogue, not at random but productively.
> -Peter Wollen[1]

It is often asserted that the primary feature of Shinoda's films is an emotional distance, beheld in "a filmic gaze that decenters, rather than consolidates, the modern subject." [2] This statement can be applied to a large number of the directors loosely grouped together within the "New Wave" cinematic movements that emerged around the world in the mid-to-late 1950s. Henderson, for example, asserts of Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967) that "His camera serves no individual and prefers none to another… Godard's tracks, which are never subjective, are usually in long shot, taking in as much of an event and its context as possible… The viewer is not drawn *into* the image, nor does he make choices within it; he stands outside the image and judges it *as a whole*."[3]

Although both Godard's and Shinoda's films evidence a common intent to frustrate total viewer investment in the illusion of the filmic image, the intimate focus Shinoda puts on his characters, the humanizing emphasis on their sexuality and viscerality, and the regular obstruction of the filmic gaze that he insists upon all attest to a very different method than Godard's as outlined above. As indicated throughout this thesis, Shinoda's commentary and filmic technique proposes that attempts to establish an objective code of cinematic representation, even a distantiated one, only serve to misrepresent the constant state of intake, processing, and unconscious reproduction of ideology which humans necessarily experience within every social interaction. Shinoda's camera is *always* involved, *always* overt in its mediation, *always* suggesting to his audience a subjective reality belonging to the artist. The technique is often made so overt that it makes confrontation with the mediating hand of the author inevitable. The

constant manipulations of the *kuroko* in *Double Suicide* and the distinctively stylized lighting and editing patterns of *Assassination*, for instance, demand that critical awareness in service of promoting dialectic with the image become an essential part of the viewing experience.

Even as the form of his films attends to his protagonists and drives their progress through a pre-written narrative, it too highlights their environments. His insertion of Ōzu-like "pillow shots" of tile rooftops and boundless forests within sequences of high dramatic tension in *Cherry Trees* shows that circumstances surrounding the bandit and his bride are just as meaningful as their actions which advance the plot. Form is used to constantly rearticulate the presence of the context in this manner: the set elements and props that constrict and limit our perspective on events interject recognition of the processes of mediation to which we are being exposed. Even as the camera is set up to center the characters perfectly within the frame and keep them at an ideal depth of focus, they are again decentered by virtue of the set design. Whether Shinoda is capturing subjects bounded within such manmade structures as lattices, or natural phenomena of cherry trees, the desire for undisrupted access and control over an image exists in tension with the constrictions of the environment. Even the author and his camera, interpellated by circumstances of nature and culture just as fully as his viewer, cannot transcend this reality of social conditions to perceive actions unmolested by external presence.

Amidst this highlighted manipulation of form, the content of Shinoda's films consistently indicate that a society founded on idealism offers up the greatest danger of appropriation by political structures to legitimize an authoritarian state. *Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees* indicates this most clearly within the noblewoman's manipulation of her otherworldly beauty to compel her husband to violence. Simultaneously, they show an awareness that the same cognitive establishment of a transcendent ideal to embody functions to organize the chaos of essential human passions through the positioning of oneself "as acting a theatrical role."[4] The common understanding of the image taken on as social identity is the only means for a subject to communicate his/her chaotic interiority. We see this expressed in the association of the human

Jihei and Koharu with the modular Jōruri puppets, and Jihei's "hailing" by the sight of the dead lovers under the bridge. Even though our reality is a material one, subject to constant change, Japanese culture is thus shown to assume that its subjects can only communicate desires by using them to indicate a pre-established, fixed and undying image – a contradiction that ensures the frustration and effacement of the subject when her/his interiority inevitably comes into conflict with objective ideals beyond her/his grasp.

Although the Imperial institution is often featured as a target of critical ire in his works as a looming presence in the Japanese arts, Shinoda consciously avoids asserting any of the Emperors as the binding force of communal identity in spite of the pervasive psychological influence of the values for which they putatively stand. Rather, the director's films submit that the crucial tool for the Japanese power structure's ideological diminishment of the subject and his/her insurmountable *ninjo* was in truth the existence of the absolute image merely *referenced* by the material monarch. Shinoda's point of concern is that, in the wake of the *ningen sengen*, the conception that human experience is meaningful only in reference to higher, immaterial ideal has proven to be eminently transferrable to other loci of national sympathy. For Shinoda, the same tensions between desire and obligation and accompanying discourses of self-sacrifice continue to exist with such national goals as "economic competitiveness" as object in the same way that the Imperial house had been prior to 1945. Although the new reality of Japan's status as a node within a network of global capitalism has demanded the creation of new archetypes to serve economic development, they continue to gesture towards an aesthetic image of self-sacrifice for a transcendent and inherently unattainable ideal.

Still, without centuries of cultural narrative affirming the supreme value of secular democracy or the competitive value of the yen through *waka* or Jōruri productions, the aesthetic value of these modern, global phenomena rings hollow too. Shinoda puts forth the notion that, even as 30,000 salarymen die each year by suicide or overwork for their companies and new ideals of the capitalist economy, such gestures of devotion modeled on historical conduct seem

hopelessly empty without a transcendent image as their object.[5] Thus, in the eyes of this filmmaker, the sight resonates as an image of pity rather than the sense of inspiring beauty such self-obliteration may have inspired prior to the cultural upheavals of 1945. While Shinoda's *jidaigeki* as analyzed in this discussion show the *roots* of this crisis in a misrecognition of the fact that culture is rooted in material conditions and cannot exist as the beautiful and transcendent object it has been posed to be, its effect in the present era is unequivocally depicted in his contemporary dramas of the early 1960s.

Dry Lake (*Kawaita Mizuumi*)[6] abounds with images of youthful nihilism. Shimojo (Mikami Shinichirō), the university student protagonist is a cynical demagogue who believes all ideology is merely a tool for manipulating others, bullying other members of his socialist student union into submission even as he pastes cutouts of Hitler, Mussolini and FDR on his wall. Elsewhere, the industrialist scion Michihiko wields his wealth as a weapon, forcing female students to strip and sing for the cash they need to support their families. Megalomania, avarice, and hedonism now motivate the sociopathic acts of these young men amidst the perceived illegitimacy of higher ideals, constituting a reactionary rejection of the notion of common interest and the inherent value of human life.

In *Pale Flower* (*Kawaita Hana*)[7], we find the yakuza enforcer Muraki (Ikebe Ryō) going through the motions in the strictly regimented Japanese underworld, which Shinoda frames as a microcosm of the social structure of the *kokutai*.[8] Even though Muraki finds his duties to the gang as fundamentally meaningless as *Dry Lake*'s Shimojo finds political ideals, he cannot envision a life outside of the yakuza, and so fritters away his time gambling with brilliantly decorated *hanafuda* cards, symbolic of the ritualistic reverence for the aesthetic images of "traditional society."[9] When the beautiful and jaded Saeko enters his life, the yakuza's response to the sudden stimulation is to objectify this real human woman as a reflection of the sublime. Muraki even refuses to have sex with her when the opportunity arises, in order to maintain the transcendent purity she has come to represent for this man in desperate search of greater meaning. His

imposition of a higher ideal upon a material being manifests in the climax through a murder which Muraki overtly presents as a tribute to Saeko. The seeming arbitrariness of this act strongly indicates the disjuncture between *bushido*-informed self-abjecting gestures and their indicated objects that has always existed, but in the 1960s is more apparent than ever in the wake of a newly-recovered Imperial humanity.

Meanwhile, in *Tears on the Lion's Mane* (*Shishi no Tategami ni Namida o*)[10], the ideal becomes displaced from Japan entirely, as the young rockabilly-singing dock enforcer Sabu (Takashi Fujiki) strives to embody the archetype of a Hollywood star in the vein of Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* or Elvis Presley in *Jailhouse Rock*. The desire for flight from his distasteful subservience to a brutal boss, attested to by the longing ballads he sings about crossing the oceans to an ambiguous paradise, is stymied by the circumstances of the life debt he feels to a brutal boss who claims to have saved his life when he was a child. His upbringing in a cultural context that poses irreconcilable conflict between desire and the social obligation, evidenced in the plays of Chikamatsu, thus ensures his fundamental inability to realize himself as a liberated subject, even if he chooses a non-Japanese image to admire.

It must be admitted that *Tears*' deep concern regarding Japan's reactionary acceptance of transposition of a global capitalist culture (not un-problematically characterized through "Western" imagery) over a Japanese system of semiotic and social relations could be construed as Shinoda's promotion of nationalistic defense of a particularized cultural identity. Films such as 1971's *Silence* (*Chinmoku*) also cast doubt on the idea that alien values can be integrated into Japan without violent existential conflict resulting as a necessary consequence. However, the deep skepticism with which films such as *Double Suicide* and 1974's *Himiko* treat any unproblematic depiction of putatively Japanese cultural icons and relationships as ahistorical, naturalized manifestations of the nation suggests that a Mishima-esque desire to revive national spirit similar to that imagined in the past is not in line with Shinoda's objectives. Both the continental origin of the shaman queen Himiko, whose reign is depicted as an early appearance of

Japanese cultural polity, and the backgrounding of *Double Suicide*'s narrative by the beats and rhythms of Balinese gamelan music, connote the cultural presence of the Other underlying the pathos of the Japanese isles, and render ambivalent any prior definitions of discrete identity that might be claimed by the people of the archipelago. Furthermore, the desirability of reviving a culture founded upon the past imaginary is counteracted by the grotesquery of the visions in which its historical manifestations are expressed throughout his films: the eroticization of severed heads in *Cherry Trees*, the fratricidal slaughter of *Assassination*, or the deformed and self-soiled shamans of *Himiko*. While a close analysis of the potentially nationalist dimensions of Shinoda's theses is outside the scope of this investigation, these images attest to a complex posture towards the limitations and potential of cultural progress for Japan's culture as it exists that is perhaps worthy as a subject of inquiry in future projects.

The postwar age in Shinoda's *gendaigeki* thus is defined by either creeping nihilistic misanthropy, reactionary revisitation of the absolutist discourses of a pre-1945 *kokutai*, or a rejection of Japanese identity and flight to Euro-American culture. And yet these responses resolve nothing for the protagonists. Every Machiavellian attempt Shimojo makes to assert dominance over the student union serves to alienate those he had hoped to captivate until he is finally arrested for his final attempt, though a terrorist act, to define himself via charismatic violence. Muraki is jailed for life, after which Saeko dies in spite of the yakuza's violent tribute to the sublime image which he had transposed upon her. Sabu's heartrending rockabilly ballads are laughed at as a curiosity rather than appreciated, and his dreams of escape to an overseas utopia are dashed after he is arrested for murdering his deceitful "benefactor" to resolve his *giri-ninjo* tension, in a conclusion that would not be out of place on the Jōruri stage. All of these are shown to be equally invalid responses that fail to address the basic issue of reflexive reference to a higher ideal in determining the shape of a subject's actions. Whether or not the reactionary responses of Shimojo, Sabu or Muraki are meant to confirm the absence or presence of

transcendent worth, the premise that motivates them cannot seem to manifest in anything but destructive acts against themselves and those around them.

The question left unanswered is thus, how can the subjects who make up the nation of Japan, having inherited the ontological legacy witnessed in Shinoda's *jidaigeki*, move on past this phase of cultural development while still maintaining some semblance of a discrete Japanese identity? As posited in the denouements of both *Cherry Trees* and *Pale Flower*, the real conditions of Japan's modernity are such that a flight to the past through absolutist nationalism is not possible. And yet, as shown by the failures at self-expression experienced by *Lion's Mane*'s Sabu and the deep dissatisfaction of *Dry Lake*'s Michihiko, embrace of a featureless, self-interested globalized capitalism is not a long-term solution to this postwar existential crisis. The continuing task for the Japanese subject seeking to preserve his/her sanctity in the 21st century thus must be to embrace his/her inherently transient and simultaneously deeply meaningful relationship with the culture that is used to characterize the national community as such.

The central protagonists of the three *jidaigeki* disussed in the scope of this thesis engage in futile struggles against their own interpellated misrecognition of their (and others') worth as subjects existing only in reference to an absolute image of the sublime. While the examples above suggest that Shinoda perceives the influence of the same pervasive episteme at work in shaping subject-structure relations even a secular, modern Japan, I submit that many of his modern dramas are not without moments of hope that he maintains for Japan's future – even if the basis for this optimism is slight and hard-earned.

This is most apparent in *Dry Lake*'s depiction of Yōko (Iwashita Shima), a university student for whom cynicism in postwar society would be well earned. Her father is scapegoated in a corruption scandal and kills himself under pressure from a powerful politician, her desperate family prostitutes her older sister to that same politician in exchange for financial support, and when she becomes inspired by Shimojo's smooth political rhetoric, he throws his utter lack of convictions in her face when he reveals the he just wanted to manipulate her into sleeping with

him. (Figure 5.1) However, in the film's finale, we see Yōko, weeping in despair and confusion, wander into the midst of a massive student rally against the 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty. Even though every trust she has placed in another has been met with callous self-serving betrayals, and she has previously indicated little interest in politics, the communal effort of the demonstrators, individual subjects coming together in optimistic struggle against a system that demeans them, seems to revive her faith. In the final moments of the film, Shinoda crosscuts between the image of a defeated Shimojo screaming in the back of a police car encircled by protestors and a low-angle shot of Yōko's beaming face as she sings a joyous song of unity with the protestors. (Figure 5.2, 5.3) The young woman's optimism is made all the more meaningful given the fact that by the time Shinoda began production on *Dry Lake* in July 1960, it was apparent that the protests re-enacted in the film were a complete failure in their effect on government policy. Shinoda indicates the protests' lack of apparent practical effect by using a low-to-the-ground shot of impassive hordes of looming military police to frame the protestors, who appear as a fragile speck of vibrant motion off in the distance. (Figure 5.4) The scene makes clear that while political rhetoric that assures utopian results should always be treated with skepticism, there is always hope (but not assurance) for the subject's dignity to be found in the struggle and embrace of a common and meaningful humanity. As much as the forces of *giri* attempt to manipulate and batter those of *ninjo* into submission, the embers of humanity will never be completely smothered – the only constant throughout the dynamic material history of our species being human passions and their inevitable confrontations with the apparatuses of culture and state.

Figure 5.1. Yōko in despair over the betrayal

Figure 5.2. Renewed hope in humanity

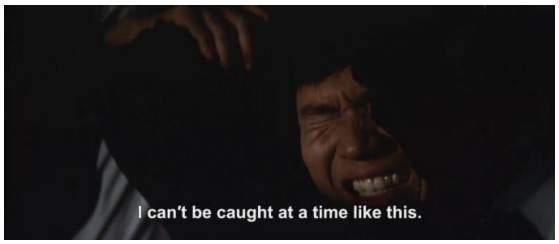

Figure 5.3. Shimojo meets the fate of the nihilist

Figure 5.4. Humanity manifest in struggle.

These films appear to articulate that the task of the ethical filmmaker is to frustrate the investment of absolutist ideologies into conceptions of Japanese identity by shining a light on them whenever they appear and revealing their historical and material origins of their rhetorical objects. It is an ambivalent task with no end. As Shinoda himself says in one of his rare moments of self-association with the *nūberu bāgu*: "Kurosawa's generation of humanists demonstrated conclusions to contemporary problems; the New Wave does not possess this certainty."[11] And yet, even if uncertain, the filmmaker's task of "bearing witness to the politics of their age," remains for Shinoda a necessary and vital one, independent of its immediate impact on real social conditions.[12] His films seek to cast away both the extremes of nihilism and absolutism and affirm that value exists in material circumstances of human experience. The Japanese historical association of worthy effort solely with the "achievement of some everlasting, unchangeable ideal" demeans all other forms of value embodied within subjective experience.[13] However, postwar nihilism's extrapolation of the absence of all meaning from the absence of absolutism's singular origin of meaning too ignores those same potentialities for affirmation of the human experience. As Clastres wrote, echoing sentiments familiar to Shinoda's expressions of Japanese modernity: "It is imperative to accept the idea that negation does not signify nothingness; that when the mirror does not reflect our own likeness, it does not prove there is nothing to perceive."[14]

In summary, Shinoda's films suggest that culture is an illusory force, an ideal understanding of the relationship between individual and society through which subjective erotic and violent urges are organized through a communal object of desire – as depicted in *Cherry*

Trees' noblewoman or the Imperial image in *Assassination*. However, as the constructed crystallization of a subject's desire for aesthetic fulfillment is perceived as natural, it is rendered an object that can be manipulated by the forces of politics, as is the cultural subject whose desires are externalized in it. Further objectification then occurs through the reinforcement and remediation of these culturally-contingent images – from poetry onto performance and film. The subject's fulfillment in response to material needs thus grows diminished in the face of a higher, more desirable and objective ideal independent of those mundane conditions. And yet, this independence means that it is inherently unreachable – resulting in either bad-faith denial of subjective agency or a nihilistic rejection of even the basic relevance of culture to society.

Using the case of 20th century Japan, Shinoda argues that the greatest potential for fulfillment of both the individual and society is not attained through self-destructive cynicism or an unending, frustrated effort to embody a transcendent image. Rather, it lies in the act of constant recognition of both the value of cultural narratives as symbolic of human desires and the subjectively-posed nature of all cultural assertions of value, and of determining an ethical response based on that contingent reality. Only through this vigilance can subjects exert a degree of ethical agency over the shape of the cultural constructs within which they must necessarily exist, living not in nostalgic devotion to an imaginary with little relation to the contemporary crisis nor in anguished and reactionary rejection of all meaning, but freed to recognize the potential for democratic negotiation with the material and the human bases of Japan's political and social structures.

Notes

[1] *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Indiana University Press, 1972) 3rd revised edition.

[2] Cornyetz, *The Ethics of Aesthetics in Japanese Cinema and Literature*, 11.

[3] Brian Henderson, "Towards a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style," *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58-59.

[4] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*, 245.

[5] Phelps. Interview with Shinoda Masahiro. "Bridging the Centuries"

[6] *Dry Lake* (also titled *Youth in Fury*), Hulu Streaming Video, directed by Shinoda Masahiro (1960; New York: Criterion, 2012). Images included in this chapter are screen captures from this pressing of the film unless otherwise acknowledged.

[7] *Pale Flower*, DVD, directed by Shinoda Masahiro (1963; New York: Criterion, 2011).

[8] Interview with Shinoda, Fūkei, 87.

[9] Ibid.

[10] *Tears on the Lion's Mane* (also titled *A Flame at the Pier*), Hulu Streaming Video, directed by Shinoda Masahiro (1962; New York: Criterion, 2012).

[11] David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 47.

[12] Bock, *Japanese Film Directors*, 344.

[13] Mellen, interview with Shinoda, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema*. 244.

[14] Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 20.

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