

# EAST-WEST

VOLUME 8 · NUMBER 1



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*The East-West Center is a public, nonprofit education and research institution that examines such Asia-Pacific issues as the environment, economic development, population, international relations, resources, and culture and communication. Some two thousand research fellows, graduate students, educators, and professionals in business and government from Asia, the Pacific, and the United States annually work with the Center's staff in cooperative study, training, and research.*

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## Editor's Note

It is with regret that we announce that *East-West Film Journal* will cease publication with the next issue, volume 8, number 2 (July 1994).

When we began publication in December 1986, we expressed the hope that the journal would help shape a new field of study centered on the cinema of the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, we sought to introduce Asian cinema to other Asian and Western audiences, including scholars, filmmakers, and the general public. We believed this would be a valuable contribution to the East-West Center's goal of increasing cross-cultural understanding in Asia, the Pacific, and the United States.

Seven years later, we take considerable satisfaction in the degree to which we have been able to achieve those aims. The journal has distinguished itself both in the range of subjects presented and the varied backgrounds of its authors. The articles in these pages have included explorations not just of well-studied cinemas such as those of Japan and India but also of the less-known films of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Tibet, and elsewhere. Journal contributors have included beginning scholars and practitioners as well as some of the most distinguished names in contemporary film studies.

Unfortunately, the number of subscribers has never grown large enough to allow the publication to become self-sufficient. The number of library subscriptions and the increasing use of the journal's articles for classroom instruction tell us, however, that it has had a greater reach than the small subscriber base might suggest. In that, too, we take satisfaction.

Although *East-West Film Journal* will cease publication, the Program for Cultural Studies at the East-West Center, as part of its research and conference activities, will continue to explore the significance of film for the people and societies of this region.



“L’assimilation Mizoguchi/Utamaro  
est Évidente”: *Five Women around  
Utamaro* and the U.S. Occupation  
of Japan

DONALD KIRIHARA

AT THE START OF *Five Women around Utamaro* (*Utamaro o meguru gonin no onna*, 1946) a spectacular parade of courtesans in the pleasure quarters of Edo sets into motion a narrative about the consequences of taking something as one’s own: a print, a style of art, another’s image, another’s love, one’s own soul.<sup>1</sup> The opening also displays the technique that audiences in 1946 had come to expect from the previous decade’s work of Kenji Mizoguchi: in two shots, the camera tracks down the long procession with no apparent goal in mind, and not even the single cut in the scene – a match on action on the motion of one of the courtesans – halts the camera movement down the procession, which continues to a dissolve to the following scene.

Despite the attractions of a costume drama that prefigures Mizoguchi’s later works of the 1950s, and despite its obvious references to the process of artistic creation that parallel one of the major directors of Japanese cinema with perhaps the best-known *ukiyo-e* print artist, many critics have dismissed *Utamaro* as a minor work, partly or mostly because of the conditions of its production under an Occupation censorship that “warped” the film’s intent and outcome. There is little doubt that the times deflected the making of the film, but it may be more fruitful to reconsider *how* that occurred, or entertain the more positive possibility that the period channeled creative decisions in interesting ways. A case can be made, I think, that the timing of *Utamaro*, rather than diminishing the film, can actually be used to revive interest in an unfairly neglected film and period in Japanese film history.

As it is, traditional means of explaining the film do not adequately rec-

ognize its social significance or formal complexity. On the one hand, an observer of social conditions may think *Utamaro* worth examination *because* of when it was made (rather than in spite of it): not only during a period of obvious hope and fear about the future, but from a vantage point that could look back upon enormous political changes and no less important social continuities. On the other hand, for a critic or maker of films, *Utamaro* is reminiscent of Mizoguchi's finest work of the 1930s in its systematic compositional sense, unusual characterizations, moralistic themes, and skillful use of parallel plot lines.

I wish to argue that in looking at *Utamaro*, timing is everything. To appreciate the delicacy of the film's references and the power of its images, we must study its complex relationship to the norms of its times by re-examining, among other things, the relevant views and practices of the period, our expectations built up around the artist's (both Mizoguchi's and *Utamaro*'s) biography, and the film itself. Of particular interest is how *Utamaro* makes use of traditions at all of these levels. Mizoguchi's film reprises and refines many tendencies found in earlier films, including the opportunistic use of contemporary controversies. In doing so, *Utamaro* not only displays the reticent narrational strategies found in his films of the 1930s and early 1940s, but also reminds us of Mizoguchi's knack for undermining the superficialities of the day's headlines (in this case, Occupation liberalism) with cutting perspectives and bitterly hopeless dilemmas. In pursuing these ideas I hope to indicate that a single film can hold more than intrinsic interest; it can serve to open a discussion of historical parallels between eras – like the 1930s and the postwar period – and prompt a reexamination of the basic assumptions we have made about authorship and the postwar history of Japanese film.

#### OCCUPATION EFFLORESCENCE

In most film histories, the Occupation period is seen as a moment of disfiguring control for Japanese cinema, when a victorious power was able to impose its will – however benevolently – directly on a nation's culture. But recent work on postwar Japan has demanded that we view the Occupation not as a monolithic entity, but as a complex, contradictory period filled with dilemmas as well as promise, with “a sense both of idealism and of idealism betrayed” (Gluck 1983, 216). Here part of the problem lies in the term *democracy* itself as used by all concerned with the Occupation in

its initial period: the goals of former enemies sometimes sounded remarkably alike, although the word *democracy* meant quite different things to different parties. For films, Noël Burch (1979, 275) has attributed this collision of ideologies immediately after the war to a peculiar “multiple determination” present in the films of the postwar period; one that has not quite shaken off the nationalist insistences of the immediate past but has not quite taken up the democratic urgings of the new guests.

The prescriptive and prohibitive censorship policies of GHQ (General Headquarters<sup>2</sup>) remain the formative background for studying Japanese films of this period, but even here multiple determinations are at issue. The work of Kyoko Hirano on the Occupation’s censorship mechanisms and her case studies of particularly victimized films have revealed much not only about the conflicts within GHQ in executing a consistent set of goals and guidelines, but also the resistance of the Japanese filmmakers themselves, emphasizing the fact that they were not passive respondents in the censoring process. Indeed, by shifting the focus from the Occupation as sole player to a member of the supporting cast, the ensemble character of the Occupation from the Japanese side may be better seen. The early period especially (September 1945 to early 1947) can be seen within what John Dower calls a cultural “efflorescence” taking place among the makers and consumers of Japanese culture, sparked by the dynamism between different Japanese traditions and American reformist ideals (Burkman 1988, 134). Here it is useful to consider traditions in a specific sense – not the arid study of practices of a dead past, but the past’s active relation to the present (Baxandall 1985, 62). Examining the Occupation as a period of teeming, often conflicting impulses and actions shifts our attention from one sensitive to dominant norms to one alert to the conflicts between norms and the importance of the immediate past in guiding our expectations in the present.

For *Utamaro*, placing it within this efflorescence begins with justifying why it was made at the time it was made. Take, for instance, the “period film” (*jidai-geki*) controversy after the war. The story is that with GHQ’s prohibition of historical films, Mizoguchi had to make a special plea for *Utamaro* in order to proceed with filming, which included the promise to make additional films about postwar women (Anderson and Richie 1982, 162).

Yet it may be more noteworthy that the apparent ban on *jidai-geki* films was very brief and unevenly enforced: one of the most popular films of the

first half of 1946 was *Chuji Kunisada*, a period film starring the prewar sword-film idol Tsumasaburō Bandō (*Nippon Times*, 6 October 1946, p. 3). The “basic principles” espoused by GHQ also allowed some space for films on “historical Japanese figures who had stood for freedom and representative government” at the same time as it disallowed possible reminders of feudal tendencies, like swords (Supreme Commander 1951, 18). Daiei was one studio that moved to take advantage of this interpretation, announcing in October 1946 a series of historical dramas to portray “common people . . . at various stages in history instead of a few aristocratic heroes and heroines” (*Nippon Times*, 8 October 1946, p. 2). Audiences seemed well aware of the new demands placed on the genre. In December 1946, the month of *Utamaro*’s release, a critic said of one *jidai-geki*, “Like many period films produced since the end of the war, a little twist is given to bring out an entirely different interpretation to an old story so that it will conform to democratic ideals” (*Nippon Times*, 8 December 1946, p. 3).

Even the story that Mizoguchi traded his *Utamaro* film for a series of disinterested *gendai-geki* (contemporary film) projects dealing with women seems incomplete: *Victory of Women* (*Josei no shōri*, 1946), about a defense lawyer who forsakes her marriage to defend a woman accused of infanticide, earned critical praise months before the release of *Utamaro* in December 1946, and may have both won Mizoguchi the “democrat’s right” to make future films under the eye of GHQ and set him in the direction toward further stories dealing with women’s issues (*Nippon Times*, 21 April 1946, p. 3). In any case, period films did not seem anathema to GHQ per se: immediately after making this film, GHQ okayed another period film by Mizoguchi based on a Saikaku story (Yoda 1965, 66–67).

Similarly, the immediacy of the war experience may have overridden GHQ’s more positive goals. The popular climate immediately after the war apparently was not one of apathy and submission. Popular antipathy toward the government, the elite classes, and big business was just as pronounced immediately after the war as official concern about the new occupiers (Gluck 1983, 194–195). *Utamaro*’s most openly “democratic” statements against feudal tradition are negative: the film’s castigation of the state-approved Kanō art school and the self-consciousness with which it attacks the class structure are references that are well documented in the career of the artist *Utamaro* (Kondo 1956; Narazaki and Kikuchi 1968).

Had GHQ cared, it also may have objected to the film's implied condemnation of censorship – Utamaro is jailed not for criticism of dominant artistic practices but for satirizing the *shogun* Hideyoshi.<sup>3</sup>

The often contradictory policies of GHQ left them open to some historical references and blind to others. Traditions could be presented if motivated within a broad definition of democracy. For instance, the Occupation, like earlier periods of foreign interest, spurred the popularity of woodblock prints. Some members of GHQ were patrons of modern artists working in this form, and Occupation personnel like Oliver Statler and William Hartnett were instrumental both in supporting the work of artists and bringing them to the attention of international audiences (Merritt 1990, 152–153, 282–286). Statler, in fact, indicates that equating the mode of production of prints to democratic ideals was not an outrageous or uncommon assumption. Several years after the Occupation he described traditional *ukiyo-e* as a “ ‘popular art.’ It was mass-produced to sell. To sell it had to catch the public fancy – and it did, blazoning the celebrated figures and foibles of its day. It was cheap and democratic . . . ” (Statler 1959, 7). The Occupation was obsessed with things feudal, but not necessarily with all things traditional, such as the woodblock prints that American soldiers were organizing exhibitions for and buying at the base PX. A film about one of *ukiyo-e*'s leading lights rested comfortably within this discourse of the art of mechanical reproduction.<sup>4</sup>

But the blind spots were available for exploitation also. Examining the films of the period within the tensions between a shifting definition of postwar democracy and prewar traditions brings out some interesting – and troubling – problems that faced Occupation liberalism. For instance, a film like *No Regrets for Our Youth* (*Waga seishun ni kui nashi*, 1946), while celebrating women as an active force in postwar adjustments, also portrays deep urban–rural suspicions that would have been familiar to audiences who participated in the exodus from cities to escape American bombers during the closing months of the war (Havens 1978, 171–172). *Utamaro* takes as a central locale of its narrative the licensed quarters of prostitution that Utamaro frequented, yet prostitution was one of the Occupation's major blind spots in its zeal to make equal rights for women a cornerstone for the new Japan, possibly because it affected American male military personnel directly. Another blind spot was pornography, which flourished after the war, and Yoda observes that the new eroticism

tolerated by the Occupation probably contributed to GHQ's willingness to allow production of *Utamaro* (Pharr 1987, 246; Yoda 1965, 66–67; Rubin 1985, 97–100).

Like *Naniwa Elegy* (*Naniwa ereji*) in 1936, *Utamaro* offers ambiguous appeals to a variety of ideological positions. In the earlier film, the plight of the poor can be attributed to a crisis of capital that would be consistent with the agendas of the far left or the far right. I have argued elsewhere that this ambiguity is at least partly due to the function of characters in Mizoguchi's prewar films (Kirihara 1992). The switchboard operator in *Naniwa Elegy* stands in for a process of victimization at the hands of forces and institutions beyond her control: a working woman forced into prostitution to repay debts that are not her own; a daughter humiliated and cast out by her family; a *moga* (modern girl) unable to marry for love.

In *Utamaro* the women may be seen as seeking independence and emancipation, but at the end all five are dead or socially ostracized. Tadao Satō points out that *Utamaro* differs from other postwar films on female emancipation in that the men in Mizoguchi's film never apologize, and the women never stop struggling, which is to say they never succeed – a theme carried over from Mizoguchi's prewar films (Satō 1982, 167–168). As in *Naniwa Elegy*, all the characters are so broadly drawn by the uncommunicative narration and distanced style that their finer features are flattened out into tendencies and types, acting out parallel situations that are exploitive and without hope. It is their pronounced *impersonality*, one that reduces individuals to shells of meaning, that is the source of the social power of both films.

This is consistent with Mizoguchi's earlier work even if it is inconsistent with a single interpretation of Occupation democracy. Particularly in the early months of the Occupation, there was still the flavor of a war of ideas, and as Dower notes, a useful way of conceptualizing the Occupation is to think of the period as an extension of the war – its often awkward and dissonant winding down – rather than war's end and a democratic rebirth (Burkman 1988, 243). The 1930s can be thought of as an extension of the war as well, albeit in a different sense. For Americans the Pacific War begins with Pearl Harbor, but for Japanese the Pacific War begins well before: certainly by 1931 and the "China incident," and perhaps even earlier. The internal struggles leading up to Japan's full involvement in China in 1937 were played out in *Naniwa Elegy*, which carefully motivates actions through the narrowly defined self-interest of each char-

acter, gradually unwinding the social fabric of the film as the plot progresses.

For Mizoguchi, the Occupation may have offered a period of cross-currents and multiple determinations reminiscent of the 1930s: a time of foreign influence and domestic uncertainty, of continuing fascination with modern culture and ambivalence toward the West, of accelerating migration to the cities and increased longing for hometowns, of pronounced inequalities across class and gender, centered on issues of money. Throughout his career, Mizoguchi's particular genius was an ability to integrate "previous states of art" into his films, not just cinematic references in style and theme, but also broader questions of culture, politics, and art. In one sense, the Occupation invited ideological posturing of the sort associated with Mizoguchi's 1930s tendency films and his wartime propaganda efforts. An ambiguous, troubling, hero-less film like *Utamaro* reprises many of the tensions found in Mizoguchi's pre-Occupation films, but this time in a postwar atmosphere of contradiction and efflorescence. The Occupation was an unusual opportunity to display these, rather than an occasion for retreat.

#### AUTHOR, PAINTER, ARTIST

Kurosawa said of Mizoguchi: "His central figures are women and the world he describes is largely either that of women or of merchants" (Richie 1984, 97). While *Five Women around Utamaro* represents an almost ideal example of this, the reputation Kurosawa refers to predates the film and points to the importance of some other prewar continuities that affected Occupation cinema and *Utamaro* in particular. Neither an apology nor an anomaly in Mizoguchi's career, *Utamaro* signals the filmmaker's continued questioning of the social foundations of Japanese society, this time using expectations surrounding the artist's biography.

Here a significant mediating factor in explaining the film is the artist's reputation, not his or her changing stature within an academy or profession, but how the artist's biography helps shape our expectations of the work. Jan Mukařovský called this the "author's personality" – not the flesh and blood figure to whom we attribute the work, but an organizing framework for the viewer's experience. Personality is bound into art history, Mukařovský noted, as a link in the development of larger cultural issues, through its differences with contemporaneous personalities, and by

integrating past practices into current work however disruptive or apparently revisionist that work may be (Mukařovský 1977, 170–171).

In the case of *Utamaro*, the artist's biography branches off into two directions, that of the film's subject and of the film's director. For the latter, *Utamaro* can be seen in the context of Mizoguchi's string of *geidomonos* (artist tales) from *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (*Zangiku monogatari*, 1939) through *Famous Sword Bijomaru* (*Meitō Bijomaru*, 1945). The last film – a *jidai-geki* about a swordmaker for the shogunate – may even provide a glimpse of *Utamaro*'s blend of personal artistry, artisanal perfection, romance, and service to society. *Bijomaru*'s hero must seek redemption after producing a faulty sword for his lord by redoubling his effort after perfection (literally, as the film emphasizes through superimpositions), and handing the finished sword to the lord's daughter.

The selective nature of *Utamaro*'s image in the film also may be seen as a mediating factor. He was not *just* a renderer of women; he was also known for his detailed work with insects and birds and for his *shunga*, or erotic drawings. But the film narrowly defines his fame in female portraiture: the “painter's duel” between *Utamaro* and *Seinosuke* centers on a full-length portrait of the Goddess of Mercy; the tattoo design *Utamaro* paints on *Takasode* is of *Kintaro* nursing at his mother's breast; at the end of the film the prints tossed into the frame are those of women, one after another. The parallel between this image of *Utamaro* and the reputation Mizoguchi had built as a director of melodramas like *Taki no shiraito* (1933), *The Downfall of Osen* (*Orizuru Osen*, 1935), *Naniwa Elegy*, *Sisters of the Gion*, (*Gion no shimai*, 1936), and *Woman of Osaka* (*Naniwa onna*, 1940) was not lost on scenarist *Yoda* (1965, 66–67). And while a modern critic has observed of the film, “L'assimilation Mizoguchi/*Utamaro* est évidente,” Mizoguchi's reputation – mixing an obsession with the artist with concern for the social – was not a lost memory at the time of the film's release. His *Sisters of the Gion* was rereleased in Tokyo in September 1946, several months before *Utamaro* (*Niogret* 1978, 39; *Nippon Times*, 15 September 1946, p. 3).

The film makes use of this association between director and subject with its self-conscious presentation of *Utamaro* “scenes”: the *Kintaro* design painted on *Takasode*'s back, the lovers *Takasode* and *Shōzaburō* fleeing the city, the maidens fishing, and the silhouette scene of *Okita* with the knife she will use to murder the lovers all reference themes and tech-

niques in prints by Utamaro. Utamaro even authored prints of the print-making process itself, in keeping with the film's tour of Utamaro's printing shop.<sup>5</sup> Such "quotes" add historically as well as "artistically" (in a connoisseur's sense) plausible detail to the film, as they also remind the viewer of the painterly substance and expertise of the filmmaker, the ability to place the artist inside one of his own prints. These moments of "pictorial figuration," as Donald Crafton calls them, have long been a convention of classical style, connoting "aesthetic legitimacy, aspiring to appeal to a putative highbrow element in the audience or, more pragmatically, to convince censors that films have cultural value" (Crafton 1992, 29–30). But as Crafton has shown, these moments may also provide the familiar basis for a defamiliarizing project. Women form the subject of the filmic Utamaro's art, exquisite images of the floating world so prized by foreign collectors. But the narration undercuts this at the same time by carefully presenting the women as objects of exchange within a larger system of ownership and possession.

This can be seen in a negative sense in the film's handling of the protagonist. One of the paradoxes of *Utamaro* is that for a story dealing with an acknowledged artistic genius, we see remarkably little of Utamaro creating. As Jonathan Rosenbaum remarks about the film, the artistry of Utamaro is presented more as a postulate than as a visible fact (Rosenbaum 1976, 262). Indeed, much of the action revolves around his inability to create, first because he has lost his "muse" and then because he has broken the shogunate's censorship laws and is kept under house arrest, his hands bound, for fifty days. The last incident, based upon an actual event in the artist's life, is simultaneously a realistic tag for the audience and representative of the most peculiar structural feature of the plot: the deemphasis of Utamaro as a catalyst for action in the narrative. He is, as Rosenbaum puts it, "Not so much the guiding force of the film as the centre of a system of valuation" (Rosenbaum 1976, 263).

In reiterating Utamaro's artistic gifts early in the film with his painters' duel and his stencil on the back of Takasode, women are seen both as the key to his commercial success and the source of his problems. We first see Utamaro, not in his studio working, but waiting at Okita's home musing on the fickleness of his former model. Later, she will be the cause of his artistic crisis ("Caught by a bad woman" is the explanation of one sponsor in discussing Utamaro's poor output). This connection helps further the "artistic creativity" story strand that is the basis for motivating Utamaro's

character, but it also emphasizes the theme of mercantile love familiar from *Naniwa Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*. In those Yoda-authored screenplays, love is not only a lost ideal but also an item of exchange in a society driven by self-interest and greed. In *Naniwa Elegy*, the switchboard operator trades her body for her family's welfare; her boyfriend trades her love for a chance to keep his job. In *Sisters of the Gion* both sisters are abandoned by their lovers: one thrown over by a man whose wife has found him work, and the other thrown out of a car by a suitor she has manipulated for profit.

In *Utamaro*, as well, the motif of possessive love as a type of ownership crisscrosses the film and is introduced in the opening scenes. Immediately after viewing the procession of courtesans that I described earlier, the first line of the film comes from an omniscient voice offscreen, who comments that the scene reminds him of a Harunobu print, then, following this suggestion, a nobleman onscreen ducks into a merchant's stall to make what amounts to an impulse purchase of an Utamaro print. Throughout the film, art and beauty are juxtaposed with business transactions. It is the publisher and merchant sponsors of Utamaro that hit on the solution to Utamaro's creative problems, not to aid a flagging friend but to improve the quality of his output. The courtesan Takasode and Shōzaburō flee the licensed quarters as outlaws; she would be severely punished for breaking her contract and leaving the government-designated area for prostitution. Oran, the swimming maiden, can be provided as Utamaro's model because she is a commoner's daughter – and thus was sold into servitude – and not from an elite family. Oshin, the homely geisha who is the fifth “woman around Utamaro,” is used for comic relief early in the film, but the end of her geisha contract and engagement to Utamaro's assistant, Take, refer to the two most common ways to escape the licensed quarters: old age (when one's economic usefulness has passed) or marriage to (and purchase by) a patron.

Other critics have noted that the forced idleness of Utamaro in the film refocuses our attention on the women around him, but as was the case in the films of the 1930s, the women of *Utamaro* are not simply tropes for subjugation according to gender, but are complex vehicles for a host of social meanings that revolve around tradition and modernity, individualism and social obligation, secular and familial goals, all of them, again, driven by money. Seen in this way, *Utamaro* is a much more challenging allegory of Occupation hopes and fears. As an example of the Occupa-

tion's goal of forwarding a "liberalized" function of women in the new Japan, *Utamaro* seems weighed down with contradictions. In its substitution of masochism for love it bears much more resemblance to the pessimistic outlook for human tenderness among the merchants and workers seen in *Naniwa Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion* than to any sort of optimism for a less exploitive society. Here we can recall Yoda's comment that democratic liberalism of the kind put forward by the American Occupation seemed to bewilder Mizoguchi (Hirano 1992, 168). It may or may not have, but the sentiments of *Utamaro* are in the same key as those in the background of the 1930s films: dissonant, corrosive, and seeming to forswear hope. By downplaying the creative aspects of the artist and alternating subplots that focus on the lives of those encircling him, Mizoguchi portrays Utamaro's crisis as one of capital as well as one of creation.

#### POSSESSION AND NARRATION

Critics have expressed disappointment with the appearance of *Utamaro* when compared with Mizoguchi's films of the mid-1930s (*Naniwa Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*, both 1936) and the 1950s (*The Life of Oharu* [*Saikaku ichidai onna*, 1952], *Ugetsu* [*Ugetsu monogatari*, 1953], *Sansho the Bailiff* [*Sansho dayu*, 1954], etc.). At the heart of most interpretations is the notion of compromise, that Mizoguchi had forsaken the social consciousness that was so much a part of his 1920s and 1930s "tendency" films or had begun to be swayed by the Western forms of representation and ideology now literally dominant in postwar Japan.

But here, too, an examination of the formal complexities of the film benefits from a wider perspective, one that acknowledges the crosscurrents of the immediate postwar years in addition to the nature of Mizoguchi's narrational experiments of the 1930s and 1940s. *Utamaro* is far more unified than most critics have been willing to recognize, at the same time that it presents a troubling, ambiguous commentary on the social conditions of the time.

Again, we need to place the film in the wake of pertinent traditions and, in this case, some earlier patterns associated with Mizoguchi. We might begin by examining the most visible attempt to unite ideological exhortations with a "national" style during the war: "monumental" style in the manner of films like Mizoguchi's *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (1939) and *The 47 Ronin* (*Genroku chūshingura*, 1941–42). Here, in

response to government and intellectual urgings to focus on the indigenous aspects of Japanese culture and history, filmmakers developed a stately style that glorified pre-Meiji cultural traditions. D. William Davis notes that monumental films did not contain the themes of national essence and pride so much as they distended them through style in an excessively obvious fashion with self-conscious gestures of appropriation (Davis 1990, 30–36). Davis also argues that in some cases (such as *The 47 Ronin*) it was possible to “overtake and obscure” these themes to the detriment of the film’s propaganda value.

If Mizoguchi’s (and other directors’) experiences during the militarist 1930s and 1940s included being encouraged to turn to themes of “Japaneseness,” that tack also could be taken with the new postwar atmosphere, while reconfiguring “Japaneseness” in a new way. The usefulness of a “national essence” in Japan did not suddenly disappear with the surrender – it merely removed “war” as the center of the debate, to be replaced eventually by industrial supremacy. Harry Harootunian and Tetsuo Najita have observed that the discourse on “cultural exceptionalism” was too powerful and entrenched to be interrupted by a mere Occupation. Part of the new postwar Japanese order was an immediate and intense debate over the indigenous nature of Japanese culture (Najita and Harootunian 1989, 768–773).

GHQ clearly realized the usefulness of cultural traditions in its policies that prohibited sword films and other expressions that exhalted a pre-Western Japanese past. At the same time, GHQ felt the need to encourage what amounted to a “new monumentalism” – one that elevated democracy in a nativist framework. As with prewar monumentalism, style may *distend* these themes, making them appear obvious for the purpose, as Davis puts it, “of rendering the audience’s perception of the Japanese cultural heritage” (Davis 1990, 94). Here, too, the object is not popularity, but the fulfillment of complex cultural and political needs.

For Mizoguchi, a case can be made that films like *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* and *Utamaro* outrun the ideological needs of their times with their self-conscious narration. Just as in the earlier films, the narration of *Utamaro* supports this idea in specific ways. Here we can take “possession” as a starting point, not simply as a “theme” but as a narrative motif. That is, as an indication how narrative structure and style are used to achieve particular ends.

Let us return to the scene described at the start of my essay, an elegant

procession of courtesans that “quotes” the material of artist Utamaro and film *Utamaro* while it sets up Mizoguchi’s technical tendencies toward long takes and camera movements. This scene has been interpreted by critics in a variety of ways to connote women as objects of patriarchal possession: the scene symbolizes women’s servitude or a collective sorrow over their plight (Mellen 1976, 101; McDonald 1984, 76).

But the opening also self-consciously functions to set up an association between a splendid device – a long camera movement down a line of figures – and the denizens of *ukiyo-e*’s “floating world” by exploiting the “painterly” tendencies Mizoguchi established earlier in his career (Kirihara 1992; Bordwell 1992, 327–346). It is reminiscent of the oblique openings to *Naniwa Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*, which use spectacular devices to initially focus attention on subsidiary relations in the narrative that will gradually rise or diminish in importance, while delaying the appearance of the protagonist. In *Naniwa Elegy*, for example, a long domestic scene with an industrialist and his wife delays the introduction to the switchboard operator heroine, while in *Sisters of the Gion* it is the auction of a bankrupt merchant that we see first and not the two geisha whose lives we will follow for the most of the film.

The opening of *Utamaro* also sets up a later scene that ranks as the most flagrant in all of Mizoguchi’s work to this time. In the middle of the film, in order to renew the artist’s passion for his art, Utamaro and others spy upon a perverse ritual conducted by a nobleman, who has the maidens serving in his house strip and dive for fish. The scene is capped by two rapid tracking shots down a long line of the women, who stare into the camera and fling off their robes as they enter the frame.

The scene lays bare the ways in which the film leads us to make particular associations through style, between the implicit sexuality of a procession of courtesans and the explicit tawdriness of servants who unwillingly strip for another’s pleasure. The use of a long tracking shot down a line of women is used in a self-consciously “developmental” way reminiscent of Mizoguchi’s use of techniques in the prewar *Naniwa Elegy* and *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum*. In *Naniwa Elegy* two sweeping camera movements follow two suitors up to the room of the heroine: the first is the industrialist who has bought her favors, the second is the boyfriend who will soon disavow her. In *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* two scenes with hauntingly similar framing and editing elegantly depict a young actor charmed by his infant brother’s nursemaid, and the same

actor, now older, emotionally adrift without the woman and confronted by his brother, now a toddler.

Just as significant, the *Utamaro* scene also marks a turning point in the narrative, for it is motivated by a crisis in the protagonist's life, one that can only be resolved through the subjugation of another. Utamaro finds renewal in the voyeuristic pursuit of his art and the acquisition of a new model, Oran. After this point, the film moves away from Utamaro, who is literally held in check in the last third of the film, placed under house arrest and unable to practice his art, while the possessive romances set in motion earlier in the film rise to overtake and exceed the protagonist. The final third of the film sees the five women around Utamaro arise as actors and objects in a troubling, multilevel game of repossession. Oran, after leaving the service of the lecherous nobleman to pose for Utamaro, runs away with Utamaro's dissolute protégé, Seinosuke. Oshin leaves a life of indentured servitude to marry Utamaro's assistant, Take. Yuki, spurned by Seinosuke, leaves her upper-class family to live with Utamaro among the merchant class. Okita concludes her struggle with Takasode over the passive Shōzaburō with a double murder.

This is still a matter of exploiting the theme of possession, but across a set of strategies and expectations developed progressively in the course of the film, and not just along a single key. "Possession" unifies the film but in a manner that outruns the idea of a democratic liberation from enslavement. The artful use of delays to redirect attention to less developed story strands – in *Utamaro*, the possessive romances enacted by the women – is a familiar prewar strategy acted out in films like *The Downfall of Osen* (*Orizuru Osen*, 1935), which uses a complex flashback structure, and *Sisters of the Gion* (1936), which intertwines several different romances with the two sisters and their suitors.

In comparing *Utamaro* to these films of the 1930s, I am not saying that it is "like" any of the earlier films as a remake is like its progenitor, but *Utamaro* does incorporate and continue many of the narrational strategies found in Mizoguchi's 1930s work. Much of what critics dislike about *Utamaro* – its tendency to swerve away from the protagonist, its seemingly disparate parallel story strands, the ambiguity of its ending – can be found in films like *Naniwa Elegy* and *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum*. In *Utamaro*, however, these strategies contribute to a tendency drawn from monumentalist films like *The 47 Ronin*: that of "canonizing" history through references to a historical subject while simultaneously

introducing a dissonant, revisionist factor to “purify” the ideological issues (Davis 1990, 214). In both *The 47 Ronin* and *Utamaro*, that revisionist process is organized around the function of women in the narrative.

## CONCLUSION

The historical film, Crafton observes, requires a partially informed viewer. One who is greeted with a hyperclassical situation: “for not only must spectators be qualified readers of classical Hollywood film conventions, they must also be equipped to recognize the previously existing historical events (and art history monuments) to which the film refers” (Crafton 1992, 40). This demand upon the film viewer to “overlay” the past and the present is not particularly rare, as Crafton has shown, and the device of pictorial figuration is especially effective for a film whose project is to rewrite history. For the subgenre of the artist’s bio-pic the character’s perspective is added to the brew: not only is there an ambiguity of tense, but also an ambiguity of knowledgability, between the narration’s omniscience and the artist’s awareness of what surrounds him – we are simultaneously asked to see things as Utamaro saw them and as Mizoguchi arranges to have Utamaro see them. This play of perspectives is the real assimilation of Mizoguchi and Utamaro, one that is contained in the narrational twists, turns, and delays of the film’s possessive romances.

The rewriting of history is no less important as well. *Utamaro* occurs at a moment when, to paraphrase Mukařovský, things are prepared for a turn (Mukařovský 1977, 170). The new agenda of the Occupation provided Mizoguchi with another opportunity to take advantage of radical social change, in this case the negative connotations of big business and government and the positive appeals of independent entrepreneurs and gender equality. Superficially, *Utamaro* is about those things, but its peculiar narration also forwards more troubling contradictions. In creating the floating world and its drifting center in the figure of Utamaro, Mizoguchi wraps around it a melodrama that displays that world for our (aesthetic and historical) pleasure while it works to show the hollow nature and selfish motivations of its subjects. In producing a film in which audiences (censors as well as those who paid for the experience) expected ideological appeals, Mizoguchi pokes fun at a feudal system that would naively censor an artist for criticizing the state, but also presents a self-obsessed artist

at work within a system of victimization. As he promised, the film transforms Utamaro into a liberal democrat, but a remarkably impotent one. At the end of the film, his concerns pale against the life-or-death choices faced by the women around him.

For Mizoguchi, *Utamaro* should motivate a reexamination of the period 1942 (after *The 47 Ronin*) to 1952 (and the international acclaim for *The Life of Oharu*) as a significant segment of his career, rather than a period of compromise to “militarist” or “Occupation” dictates. Mizoguchi may have been the most opportunistic director of Japan’s studio era, moving from one studio to another, mastering one genre after another, working under a variety of social and economic conditions. He seemed to be able to triumph at moments of unusual social stress: after the 1923 Tokyo earthquake with *In the Ruins* (*Haikyo no naka*) and *Blood and Soul* (*Chi to rei*); in the tumult of 1936 with *Naniwa Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*; in the early days of the Occupation with *Utamaro*. The 1942–1952 period needs to be reviewed as an era when Mizoguchi refined not only his image as an interpreter of stories about women (as in *The Love of Sumako the Actress* [*Joyū Sumako no koi*, 1947], *My Love Burns* [*Waga koi wa moenu*, 1949]) but also the remarkably nuanced interrelationship between his carefully controlled, exquisitely mounted narration and the ideological turmoil of postwar Japan. After 1952, the artistic self-consciousness of *A Story from Chikamatsu* (*Chikamatsu monogatari*, 1954), the rewriting of history in *New Tales of the Taira Clan* (*Shin Heike monogatari*, 1955), the political allegory of *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sanshō dayū*, 1954), and the clever undermining of a controversial social issue in *Street of Shame* (*Akasen chitai*, 1956) all find their roots in *Utamaro*.

For Japanese film, *Utamaro* should indicate the need to revise our view of the “postwar” era from 1945 to 1952, from an “interim” between the supposedly more interesting 1930s and 1950s to a key period for its continued development of tendencies brought out during the 1930s: tendencies that have to do with preferences in production (such as the transformation of genres that the industry depended upon and the subsequent shifts in their appeals to audiences) and the nimbleness with which the industry handled rapid changes in dominant ideology. If *Utamaro* indicates anything, it is that the “democratic film” of 1946 had many different sides and drew from many different, and sometimes contradictory, sources. A sampling of the films from the period indicates its diversity: Ozu’s *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (*Nagaya no shinshi roku*, 1947), *A Hen in the Wind*

(*Kaze no naka no mendori*, 1948), and *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949); Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidore tenshi*, 1948) and *Stray Dog* (*Nora inu*, 1949); and Mizoguchi's *Women of the Night* (*Yoru no onnatachi*, 1948) and *Picture of Madame Yuki* (*Yuki fujin ezu*, 1950).

Finally, if the Occupation era may be seen as a formative period for subsequent tendencies in Japanese cinema, one could say the same thing of the postwar art cinema in general. The narrational challenges of *Utamaro* and the need to understand it in terms of earlier practices could suggest a reevaluation of the importance of precedents and continuities in the rise of the art cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. The postwar international art cinema built upon the traditions that preceded it, sometimes in purposeful ways posed as clear breaks from the past (for example, the Italian neorealists) and other times in more complex ways that integrate the past within the requirements of the present. It is in the latter category that Japanese cinema can teach us many things. The national film movements that surged after World War II depended upon momentary imbalances and contradictions in social, economic, and artistic life, but the bases for these movements run much deeper and start much earlier. Perhaps more spectacularly than any other country, Japan used the first half of the twentieth century trying to come to terms with its own modernity, and the 1930s saw in rehearsal many of the issues that would play themselves out in the late 1940s and 1950s. It is this clash of traditions and not their subjugation under an occupying power that makes *Utamaro* such an interesting film, and the postwar era of Japan such a fascinating period for study.

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## Notes and References

1. Portions of this essay were presented at the 1992 Society for Cinema Studies conference in Pittsburgh and the 1992 symposium on "Japanese Cinema as Viewed by the World: New Perspectives" organized by The National Film Center of The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. I am grateful for the comments from participants at both of those forums. I also would like to thank Kristin Thompson for first pointing out to me what a wonderful film *Utamaro o meguru*

*gonin no onna* is, and Fujio Shinjo for his help in preparing this essay. Part of the research for this article was made possible by funding from the office of the Vice President for Research at The University of Arizona, and I thank Dr. Michael Cusanovich for his support.

2. I will refer to Occupation authorities generally as GHQ for convenience, although dictates from different departments (like the Civil Censorship Division, or CCD) often contradicted one another. The most common acronym in histories about the Occupation, SCAP (Supreme Commander Allied Powers), was usually reserved for references to *the* supreme commander, MacArthur, and the discourse surrounding him.

3. Exactly what the real Utamaro was jailed for is a matter of some controversy: whether it was for a series of portraits of Hideyoshi with his concubines or for not following the letter of the censorship laws. It is clear, however, that Utamaro and others regularly tested the limits of government censors, partly because it lent their work an air of contemporary realism and partly because it was commercially lucrative to do so, and this could not have been lost on Mizoguchi given his prewar experiences with controversial film subjects.

4. For an interesting study of *Five Women around Utamaro* and *ukiyo-e* in the contexts of Walter Benjamin's observations about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction and John Berger's writings on art and culture, see Andrew (in press).

5. The prints referenced include *Breastfeeding: Kintaro and His Mother* (c. 1798–1801), *The Lovers Umegawa and Chubei* (c. 1797), *Diving for Abalone* (c. 1798–1801), and *The Restaurant Nakata-ya* (c. 1798–1801), although the silhouette motif is a favorite one in Utamaro's work. See Kondo (1956), Narazaki and Kikuchi (1968), and Narazaki (1988–1990). Untitled prints of the printmaking process are in Hillier (1961, 7).

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## Film between Woodblock Printing and Tattooing: Kenji Mizoguchi's *Five Women around Utamaro*

ANGELA DALLE VACCHE

NINETEEN FORTY-SIX, WHEN Kenji Mizoguchi shot *Five Women around Utamaro*, a melodrama on the life of the famous woodblock print artist set at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was an eventful year in Japanese political history. A new set of laws to replace the Meiji Constitution of 1889 was promulgated in November and took effect on May 3, 1947. This was only the first step toward the “democratization” of Japan supervised by General Douglas A. MacArthur during an occupation period that ended on April 28, 1952, with a peace treaty signed in San Francisco, while the Korean War was in progress. After formally surrendering to the Americans on August 14, 1945, Japan was in desperate economic conditions and willing to cooperate with the former enemy in order to overcome the disasters of war and the pain of defeat. The new order retained the emperor as the symbol of the Japanese state but transferred actual political power to the people, while it eliminated paternal authority of adult family members. The emphasis on civil liberties enabled women to vote for the first time and permitted labor unions to organize.

The end of the war and the establishment of Western “democracy” in Japan made even more apparent Mizoguchi’s contradictory stance between the past and the future: “I want to continue to express the new, but I cannot abandon altogether the old. I retain a great attachment for the past, although I have only little hope for the future” (Morris 1967, 13). The director’s mixed feelings toward historical change characterized his leadership of the first labor union in the Japanese film industry, organized through the Shochiku Ofuna Studio. In contrast to what is expected of a left-wing militant, Mizoguchi was notoriously shy about talking in public,

disliked strikes, and, in previous years, his political affiliations had been as ever-shifting as his constant oscillation between period films (*jidai-geki*) and contemporary subjects (*gendai-geki*), both genres focusing on the burden of society and tradition and on the plight of women for a better life.

In this postwar climate of widespread poverty and social upheaval, Japanese audiences looking for easy entertainment and intrigued with the American way of life “streamed into the theaters that had survived the bombings” (McDonald 1984, 74). Even though filmmaking entailed great difficulties due to increasing inflation and shortages of every kind, the film industry hastened to build more theaters and pushed for new productions. The American censors, however, did not support mere entertainment at the movies. As Kyoko Hirano explains in her book on Japanese cinema under the American occupation, *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo*:

The “democratization films” were also called “idea pictures.” . . . officials pressured the film industry to emphasize this type of film, at the expense of “escapist films,” which it considered purely entertainment-oriented and therefore devoid of “reorientation value.” (Hirano 1992, 154–165)

Although it was executed in a rush, Mizoguchi’s *Five Women around Utamaro* is no simple escapist tale. In depicting the romantic vicissitudes of five women – Okita, Tagasode, Oran, Yukie, and Oshin – all of them linked in different ways to Utamaro and his circle of disciples, merchants, publishers, and teahouse owners in Yoshiwara, the pleasure district of Edo (ancient Tokyo), Mizoguchi analyzes the clash of rigid social rules and mercantile demands against the workings of male creativity and the transgressive nature of female desire.

More specifically, the representation of different art forms enables the director to express ambivalence toward the cinema, while also giving him the opportunity to spell out his own theory of what the filmic image should be like.

By situating the cinema between tattooing and woodblock printing, Mizoguchi, in *Utamaro*, interrogates the double-edged nature of his own artistic medium. For the director, tattooing oscillates between phallographic violence and the transformation of the body into art against conventions of markets and prices. This split between rebellion and social conformity is also true of the other art form explored by Mizoguchi, woodblock printing, which in late eighteenth-century Edo challenged the Kanō school of painting but was also a form of commerce instrumental to a mercantile

class aspiring to the status quo. Woodblock printing and tattooing stretch respectively across the opposite poles of mass consumption and unsettling liminality. For Mizoguchi, with a comparable split vocation, the cinema either perpetuates social oppression, while empowering vision through the cuts of editing and the penetration of space, or it discloses a realm of freedom through the deployment of all sorts of distancing techniques and a penchant for abstraction and the void.

If *Utamaro* had to struggle against the shogun who in 1804 arrested him for his irreverent depiction of a political figure,<sup>1</sup> during the making of his film, Mizoguchi was obliged to consult repeatedly with the occupation authorities. The Americans feared that a story set in the feudal past of Japan by a director who had previously dealt with *hara-kiri* and tea ceremony<sup>2</sup> would inhibit the transition toward Western democracy. As a historical film with the female protagonist murdering her former lover and his mistress out of jealousy, and thus bringing upon herself capital punishment, *Utamaro* came up against the Americans' ban on productions approving suicide, directly or indirectly, or portraying life as not worth living (Hirano 1992, 44–45). In fact, it was only after great effort that Mizoguchi sold to the censors the argument that *Utamaro* would be nothing else but a statement in favor of popular art and bourgeois life rather than a nostalgic recollection of bygone days with samurai and geisha.

Still the Americans became the new oppressors Mizoguchi had to wrestle with, scene after scene, to the point that the production was marred by constant arguments, interruptions, and compromises. After the release of the film, perhaps because *Utamaro* was meant to be a sort of meta-cinematic statement in an autobiographical key of how Mizoguchi perceived his own creative predicament, his loyalty to the arts of the past in postwar Japan, and his relationship to women, the director declared that, even though he would like to have had more time to develop his project, he was standing by the final result (Andrew and Andrew 1981, 15).

In a polemic on Mizoguchi's mixed feelings about *Utamaro*, the critic Kaneto Shindo argued that the film was dry and lacking in sensuality. Likewise Kanji Kunieda (1893–1956), the author of the original novel (1941–42) adapted for the screen by Mizoguchi's faithful scriptwriter, Yoshikata Yoda, expressed his disappointment that the film did not sufficiently emphasize how eroticism paves the way for personal freedom. Yoda himself admitted that, while he wanted to portray *Utamaro* as Mizoguchi's alter ego, his handling of the project did not overcome a

series of “complex” and “muddled” ideas which, in turn, contributed to the “dispersion” and “confusion” of the overall theme (Rosenbaum 1976, 262).

These shortcomings may be attributed to the limited resources of the film industry in the immediate postwar period. Perhaps, despite the reputation for accurate historical detail and pictorial tableaux, Mizoguchi's studio could not afford investing in high production values and expensive decorative touches. Nevertheless when we consider Mizoguchi's training in the visual arts as a young man at the Aohashi Western Painting Research Institute, it is surprising that he did not use *Utamaro* as an opportunity to indulge much more in the fabrics of courtesans' kimonos and in the secrecy of folding screens.

Thus Mizoguchi did not take full advantage of the pleasurable component of *Utamaro*'s art, which endlessly celebrated female seduction in the context of gardens and carnivals, boating parties, and waterfronts, while his courtesans gather shells along the shore and catch fireflies under the moon, or, in the privacy of their chambers, engage in domestic chores and in the ritual of blackening their teeth for embellishment. In a sense Mizoguchi's reliance on claustrophobic framing, multilayered compositions, and an intricate plot hint at self-censorship or at a desire to drain visual pleasure out of the image, with characters' clothes and domestic paneling amounting to a complex intersection of shadowy surfaces.

Only a few iconographic details emerge from a comparison of *Utamaro*'s prints and Mizoguchi's film: Oshin smoking a long pipe, for instance, recalls the carefree attitude of several courtesans by *Utamaro*, while the soft, black cloth draped around Tagasode's face during her elopement with Shōzaburō recalls the Madonna-like typical female attire used for a whole string of prints about lovers in flight. Even if *Utamaro* is about the life of a major figure in woodblock printing, the director's visual style is characterized by a consistent elision of art historical citations as if he wanted to empty the filmic image from within of the sensual appeal of *Utamaro*'s work. By withholding the allure of art history, Mizoguchi makes sure to have his filmic image veer toward emptiness or absence. Mizoguchi's rejection of art history as sensuality suggests an uneasiness with the female body, whose power to evoke castration as a result of sexual difference the director must have half-consciously compared to the cuts of woodblock printing, filmmaking, and tattooing.

Self-censorship, however, or at least a tendency to frustrate the viewer's

pleasure in vision by producing a filmic image where anthropomorphic elements become static shapes and the decorative component veers toward lifeless intarsia, was a stylistic strategy Mizoguchi consistently practiced well before the Occupation. As film historian David Bordwell remarks:

During the nineteen twenties and the nineteen thirties Japan had one of the most stringent censorship codes in the world. . . . Mizoguchi's films challenge a censorship that banned depiction of adultery, nudity, "glaring eroticism of any kind," and "scenes of the interior of brothels, whether licensed or not." One historical effect of Mizoguchi's long shots and reversals of frontality may have been the downplaying of the immediately sensational aspects of his subjects. (Hence the frequent conflict between a highly melodramatic script situation and a detached staging of the action.) It is also possible that Mizoguchi's long take was employed to create a durational continuum which was difficult for a censor to tamper with. (Bordwell 1983, 113)

On the other hand, it is also possible that the "reticent," "dry" *mise-en-scène* of *Utamaro*, a film set in brothels where the marketing of art runs parallel to the commerce of the female body, might be an attempt to get along with the "democratizing" mind-set of the American censors, which, in turn, was compatible with a climate of opinion encouraging the emancipation of Japanese women and condemning prostitution.<sup>3</sup> Even if the American occupation brought about the fashion of kissing in public and the three "Ss" of "screen, sports, and sex," an excess of directorial nostalgia for the highly erotic and precious settings of *Utamaro*'s age might have triggered the censors' dislike of brothels.

However, the question still remains of why Mizoguchi downplays to such an extent not only the sensual side of *Utamaro*'s art, but even the visibility itself of the filmic image. It is as if the director had come to equate a proliferation of art historical allusions and an excess of pleasurable vision with the voyeuristic practices and the obscenities of Western modernity.

The best art for Mizoguchi does not celebrate the singularity of the self. It depends not on appropriation or mastery but on a long, passive, distant look. Film critics (Andrew, Kirihara) agree that *Utamaro*'s contemplative camera recalls the attitude of a viewer trained in meditation who bears witness to the exhausting, destructive effects of human passion, while stubbornly holding onto the role of detached spectator in front of the performance of human life undoing itself. Mizoguchi's awareness that staring at the world may not change its madness but can help us to get beyond its

constraints finds support in the staging of internal audiences in *Utamaro*, namely, disciples witnessing the master's display of artistic skills. The turning of duration into a form of strength not only accounts for Mizoguchi's commitment to the long take at the expense of cutting but also explains the frequent nonactional moments in *Utamaro*. In Donald Kirihara's words:

We wait for figures to move to fill an empty space within the composition; we endure long pauses while characters catch their breath or sip a drink; we linger for an unusually long time on a vacated set before cutting to the next shot. (Kirihara 1992, 70)

It is this emphasis on holding onto one's own burden to the limit that accounts for Mizoguchi's use of professional actors who can handle the sustained gaze of the camera and function well in single set-ups deployed for an unusually long time until decor gradually evolves into intangible atmosphere.

Needless to say, this discipline of patience and sacrifice, of suffering and dying, explains Mizoguchi's obsession with women and melodrama in his cinema, while it also has a precedent in the formalization of oppression into art thanks to the theatrical and narrative traditions of Noh and Naniwa Bushi (Satō 1982, 185). Likewise the taste for absence and emptiness spans religion and Oriental art, which for centuries has attempted to paint the ephemeral and the insubstantial such as atmosphere, silence, shadows, and the void. This aesthetic orientation accounts for Utamaro's fascination with the white, smooth backs of his models, Tagasode, Oran, and Okita, for it is especially this part of the female body which most resembles a painter's empty canvas at the stage which exists either before or beyond painting.

The fact that Utamaro's women die in the name of love can be seen as a projection of the director's notorious ambivalence about femininity, for it is well known that Mizoguchi depended on the other sex for his inspiration, but he also felt threatened by it.<sup>4</sup> This is why, for instance, he thrived working with actress Kinuyo Tanaka, who plays Okita, the female protagonist in *Utamaro*, but he also tried to squash her ambition to become a director. Yet, despite his reputation as a womanizer and as a regular visitor of brothels, Mizoguchi was obsessed with the liberation of women, as if only their emancipation could generate a way out of his own haunting family history. Not only did he grow up with a harsh father and a victim-

ized mother, but he repeated this abusive pattern, because he relied economically on his sister to launch his career, while his wife ended up in an asylum.<sup>5</sup> Hence, in *Utamaro*, Okita's fate oscillates between jealousy pushed to the extreme of self-destruction – or so it seems from a strictly Western point of view – and a statement of uncompromising desire which uses death as the void to perform a radical passage into an inscrutable chain of beings, a new form of life, thus defying all social constraints and the limits of the commercial screen. In contrast to Christianity, where time is linear and has an end, for Mahayana Buddhists like Mizoguchi, dying is a transitory threshold rather than an abrupt stop, for time is cyclical. In addition, as soon as we consider that the making of *Utamaro* occurs right after the end of World War II and the sacrifice of innumerable kamikaze pilots, we have to remind ourselves that death has always had a special flavor for the Japanese. In fact, kamikaze (meaning “divine wind”) pilots took on suicide missions because for Buddhists death paves the way to spiritual enlightenment and enables the transformation of an average individual into something eternal.

According to a Buddhist view, Okita's death may be the end of Okita, yet it is not an absolute ending, since life is like a wheel. The idea of death as positive sliding into the wider cycle of nature recurs in the journeys undertaken by Mizoguchi's characters. As Linda Ehrlich (1990, 2) explains, “The journey, with its pattern of embarkation, return, and renewal, is associated in Mizoguchi's films with the working through of a metaphysical or psychological problem concerning the nature of desire.” Interestingly enough, in *Utamaro*, the artist's journey to the palace of the shogun who persecutes him is never shown. By contrast, Okita's wandering through a beautiful countryside, sparkling with light and water, is reminiscent of the French Impressionist landscapes Mizoguchi studied and loved at the Aohashi Western Painting Institute. Furthermore, Yukie's walk through an awesome forest, in the footsteps of her lost lover, Seinosuke, suggests that women, more frequently than men, have the courage to undertake journeys of danger in the name of an unfulfilled love.

In particular, the links between Mizoguchi's cinema of desire and emptiness, women and death become evident as soon as we compare two very similar sequences involving processions of female beauty in *Utamaro*. At the beginning of the film, Mizoguchi's camera tracks against the fluid unfolding of a majestic line of courtesans walking down the main street of Yoshiwara (Nakanochō) under vaporous clouds of cherry blossoms whose delicate petals announce the arrival of springtime and remind us of the

ephemeral nature of all things. The sequence gains a hypnotic edge from the overlaying of the camera's speed against the courtesans' slow gait, for they wear tall and heavy shoes which, step after step, they have to drag across the ground sideways, thus appearing to fall on their own movement forward. Put another way, spiritual enlightenment requires a letting go which death, as a surrendering to absence, encapsulates.

This liquid change of posture well fits the so-called Floating World of *ukiyo-e*, or woodblock printing, in Yoshiwara, the region of fleeting pleasures, while it presents us "with the process of coming to a peak of meaning, only to slip off in search of something further" (Andrew 1984, 183). In other words, the courtesans' drooping advance marks a journey downward which for Buddhism, where there is no equivalent to sin, Christ's Passion, or to the Lost Garden of Eden, can only initiate a resurgence, without marking a stop or a punishment. At the same time, these women's expressionless, hieratic faces under heavy makeup, their enveloping kimonos shimmering in the sun and stately progress along the rhythm of traditional Japanese music spell out the burden of social conventions.

Okita, Utamaro's most attractive model and the most famous waitress in the Naniwaya teahouse, kills her lover, Shōzaburō, and his mistress, Tagasode, thus committing a violent crime for the sake of a radical passion. Okita's gesture comes close to a suicide, but this for the Japanese is not an act of despair. Rather it is a positive statement, especially if it entails dying for a romance. This is so because, in Japanese culture, the legacy of Confucian morality permits flippant sex, but regards the intensely personal nature of romantic love as a major threat to the social order. The status quo is so strongly grafted onto relations between parents and children that this overpowering family structure inevitably weakens male lovers and dooms women to suffer (Barrett 1989, 120).

As a form of social rebellion, Okita's violence is a potentially positive measure of her desire, but it condemns her to death, while it also liberates her into an absolute and privileged form of existence, since, by virtue of her extreme action, she will continue to live on forever in Utamaro's rebellious art. It is therefore her gesture of erasing life from the social frame she inhabits that rekindles the artist's creative impulse, for her dropping out of the narrative precedes a cascade of splendid woodblock prints. Significantly it is only right before the screen becomes dark and empty that Mizoguchi feels at ease about citing Utamaro's work directly, for the death of the film releases the artist's work for our view.

By withholding the allure of art history all the way to the end of the

film, Mizoguchi practices a form of anti-cinema, since Western cinema and in particular films about famous artists are based on the spectacle of the female body, the sensuality of the visual sources cited, commerce, and individual mastery. Thus, by withholding direct allusions to Utamaro's erotic prints and in choosing absence, the director comes to occupy a position closer to Okita's gesture of voiding rather than to Utamaro's productive drive. One could argue that Mizoguchi's two alter egos in the film, Okita and Utamaro, disclose his indecision as to whether to seek freedom from the West through Japan's religious philosophy or to strive for liberation from Japanese oppressive social customs through Utamaro's popular, commercial art. In fact, just as in Hollywood, Utamaro's image can only be a feminine object serialized with endless variations for male voyeurism.

The impact of Okita's action on Utamaro's creativity clearly surpasses the stimulation provided by the merchants who surround the artist. As soon as Utamaro's output declines in quantity and quality to the point of endangering their hefty profits, they take him to a spectacle of young women undressing on a beach and diving for fish under the vicious gaze of a wealthy lord. With emphatic camera work that recalls the shooting of the courtesans' procession at the beginning of the film, Mizoguchi tracks along two lines of swimmers who, one after another, take their clothes off with the coordination of dancers in a mockery show halfway between a multiple striptease and a French cancan.<sup>6</sup> Instead of conveying the transitory nature of life, this procession of female bodies is a triumph of male lust whose climax is marked by a close-up of Oran seen from behind as she enters the water.

The excitement of the scene stems from the way in which the eye of the camera chases the women under the water with the same eagerness with which they swim after the fish. Here the cinema does not bear witness to the ancient traditions of Japan but thrives on an orgy of Western values such as possession and presence, proximity and speed, leading to the transformation of Utamaro's face into a distorted mask of relentless appetite for female beauty.

As Noël Burch explains, Mizoguchi's first postwar films were inflected by a fascination with the "efficiency" and "effectiveness" of Hollywood codes. Yet, just as it is difficult to catch a fish with bare hands in the water, the cinema cannot capture these women's souls, even though it displays their bodies. In short, Mizoguchi's underwater shot and close-up hardly stand comparison with his camera experiencing the seduction of its own

power to move, as the courtesans periodically fall to rise to a higher spiritual level, in a sequence truly charged with “nostalgia for an exemplary past of personal and national rigour” (Burch 1979, 243).

#### CINEMA AS A POPULAR MEDIUM AGAINST TRADITIONAL ART: FREEDOM OR CONSTRAINT?

The analogy between cinema as a popular art and woodblock prints is so easy to establish that Mizoguchi's *Utamaro* quickly acquires a self-reflexive edge. The director, however, had much more of a social consciousness than his famous predecessor. Utamaro's work, by emphasizing hairstyle and dress in a way similar to fashion plates, was meant to keep the morale of the populace high. His depictions of courtesans and actors, teahouses and brothels in Yoshiwara hardly documented life as a whole in ancient Edo. There the rise of the mercantile class occurred amidst social strife and under the oppressive grip of the shogun.<sup>7</sup> Utamaro's art was as escapist as the whole district of Yoshiwara, an area of relative freedom controlled by the authorities, but to some extent separate from the rest of the city in such a way that individuals could temporarily circumvent rigid rules of behavior.

Just as woodblock printing had emerged in conjunction with other popular arts linked to spectacle and prostitution, literature and entertainment, Mizoguchi came to the cinema after taking on a variety of odd jobs as textile designer, newspaper illustrator, and porcelain decorator. But the links between cinema and woodblock prints are perhaps most apparent in the fact that both these practices rely on the appeal of female stars and on a cooperative form of authorship,<sup>8</sup> which in Utamaro's case included a crucial partnership with Tsutaya Juzaburo (1750–1797), the son of a brothel-keeper in Yoshiwara and a man of astute business sense. The commercial film industry Mizoguchi worked in was as profit-seeking as the entrepreneurs (publishers, booksellers, theater owners) who promoted Utamaro's art and woodblock prints in general by making sure that images of beloved courtesans, famous actors, and of all sorts of entertainments would be inexpensive and endlessly available for public consumption.

Although Utamaro's art did not deal with the famines devastating the countryside and the gradual impoverishment of the samurai class, his work maintained a revolutionary edge to the extent that he went against

the Kanō School of traditional painting. Instead of depicting only religious or natural subjects, Utamaro turned his attention to real people in Japanese daily life, thus rebelling against the authority of high art with the same vengeance Mizoguchi always showed toward paternal figures in his films. In *Utamaro*, therefore, the system of the arts is grafted onto a family melodrama of sons in revolt and daughters in chains. In addition, just as the cinema for Mizoguchi exhibits a split between social constraint and personal freedom, Utamaro's persona oscillates between the roles of oppressive father and helpful negotiator.

At the beginning of the film, Seinosuke, an academic painter, decides to buy a print by Utamaro to "amuse" Kanō, the father of his fiancée, Yukie. As soon as he reads an irreverent inscription by Utamaro against his mentor, Seinosuke decides to challenge the rival to a duel. Not only does Utamaro respond by proposing a contest in artistic skills, but the image of the sword cuts across, so to speak, Mizoguchi's rejection of phallocratic authority, American censorship, and even questions of historical accuracy.

To begin with, the prohibition of swords in Yoshiwara was not only to avert bloodshed between drunken patrons, but to prevent the inmates of the quarters from turning the swords against themselves. While love suicides were a successful and bohemian theme in plays, in real life a courtesan who committed suicide was buried in the position of a dog, because only this animal was thought to have no ghost that could return to haunt the brothel (Link 1985, 23). By killing her rival Tagasode, a woman of much higher rank in comparison to her status of simple teahouse entertainer, Okita, in the footsteps of Utamaro's populist appeal, establishes that social change and personal assertion can come only from the lower, newly emerging, classes.

The question of social class reappears in conjunction with Utamaro's decision to use Oran as a model. The beautiful diver he has spotted on the beach among many other women is at the service of a high-ranking lord, yet, unlike other concubines, she is a commoner's rather than a samurai's daughter. If Utamaro's artistic interest in Oran defines her as a woman of the future, of the new art, it is also true, however, that she justifies her submission to Utamaro by drawing an equivalence between the artist's creative urge and her lord's voyeuristic demands. Thus, it seems that, while women's behavior points toward the dissolution of an ancient social system, without their rebellion in private life, Utamaro's art alone is not enough to upset class boundaries.

Furthermore, in keeping with the American censor's ban on swords, Mizoguchi stages a duel of brushes between the two artists. Consequently the director sets up an opposition between Utamaro and Seinosuke, a member of an ancient samurai family, who paints according to rules as fixed as the steps of a tea ceremony.<sup>9</sup> The woodblock print artist, however, answers the challenge by updating the image of Kannon, a Buddhist Goddess of Forgiveness, which Seinosuke outlines with all the respect the Kanō School feels towards religious and legendary topics. Despite his rebellious stance, Utamaro works off the tradition and, from time to time, finds himself in the position of loving father.<sup>10</sup> Utamaro's fatherly stance becomes especially clear when Yukie visits him while looking for Seinosuke, who has abandoned her to spend his nights with Okita.

Throughout the narrative Utamaro tries to reconcile Kanō's daughter with his newly acquired disciple. Unfortunately, after seeing the famous master at work, Seinosuke worships his talent and abandons his former school with indifference toward Yukie's desperation. Finally, in the role of paternal mediator, Utamaro congratulates his assistant, Take, for his decision to marry Oshin, the only woman in the artist's circle who is not feminine and whom he does not seem eager to paint. Unable to appear in any print by Utamaro – at least according to the film – Oshin, in contrast to Okita, Oran, and Tagasode, does not get involved in a web of female rivalries for the same man. Like Oshin, Yukie does not pose for Utamaro. Yet, her newly found role of worker in a woodblock printing shop parallels her unwilling involvement in a contest with Okita first, Oran later, for Seinosuke's love.<sup>11</sup>

Somehow Utamaro's efforts to bring Seinosuke back to Yukie, as well as his delight in front of Take and Oshin as a newly formed couple, are only one side of the artist's impact on the community in which he lives, for his art either divides people or transforms them so radically that previous relationships based on family or social class do not hold up any longer. This is especially true when Seinosuke observes Utamaro's drawing two legendary figures on the beautiful, perfect back of Tagasode, or when Oran, after posing for the artist, abandons her timid behavior to the point of running away with Seinosuke. Likewise Yukie's social allegiances change as a result of her contact with Utamaro's circle.

Even though Seinosuke describes Kanō's daughter as a woman forever steeped in the old tradition of birds and flowers painted on silk screens, we shall find her walking alone in the night, and earning a living without

falling into prostitution.<sup>12</sup> Finally Utamaro's destructive effects on community emerge from Mizoguchi's refusal to link the upper level of a building with its lower section: the woodblock printing shop, for instance, is upstairs, but it is not clear what happens downstairs. Likewise, when Yukie visits Utamaro at night during her search for Seinosuke, the upstairs level appears to be isolated from the rest of the house.

Utamaro's efforts to maintain the status quo within his small social world are the flipside of a force as destructive as Kanō's silent rejection of his daughter Yukie. It is as if Mizoguchi were in awe of his own art, while feeling both helpless in front of and attracted to Okita's refusal to compromise. After following with a lateral track Seinosuke and Kanō's daughter walking across the room, the camera reorients its position to intercept the ominous figure of the father suddenly emerging in the background of the shot. Kanō's arrival and his expulsion of Seinosuke from his house disclose a long, deep corridor stretching into an obscure distance. The evil father summons a vertigo of anxiety, while he stands for a potential gesture of penetration into space.

Although Mizoguchi is notorious for his tendency to minimize editing in favor of the long take, long shots, and extended camera work, the director's use of characters and objects into the background of the shot is not comparable in any way to the sharp, highly informative, deep focus practiced by Renoir, Welles, and Wyler. It is also true, however, that *Utamaro* has an unusual number of medium shots, close-ups, and cuts in comparison with other Mizoguchi films such as *Life of Oharu* (1952), *Ugetsu monogatari* (1953), and *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954), where the long take leads to an unparalleled suggestion of the ephemeral, to a sense of fluidity, and to an elegiac tone.

Instead of enhancing his viewers' ability to see deeper in space, Mizoguchi distributes the elements of his compositions in such a way as to obscure their features and how they might relate to each other. On the contrary, by channeling the spectators' attention through a system of looks latching onto the most important objects or through meaningful contrasts between background and foreground, Renoir, Welles, and Wyler establish dialectical nuances and hierarchical values without cutting from one element to another. The responsibility of editing from one shot to the next has shifted from the film's editor to the viewers, who, unable to count on the cuts, are on their own in sorting out all the visual and narrative cues contained within one single, long take.

By contrast, Mizoguchi does not compensate for his dislike of external cutting by encouraging viewers to do their own editing into the depth of one, single long take punctuated by several reframings and choreographic rearrangements of the actors' positions. His backgrounds remain difficult to see, while characters and objects are often distributed as obstacles to one another. In comparison to the deep-focus filming of Renoir, Wyler, and Welles, despite all these directors' shared rejection of the Hollywood classical decoupage, where the establishing shot is followed by a cut to a medium shot, and then a cut to a close-up, Mizoguchi's method signals an unparalleled uneasiness with editing as cutting and with penetration of space in the rubric of camera movement.

The only approach the Japanese director seems truly at ease with is one underlining the horizontality of the image, especially through camera work that takes advantage of the width of the frame. In addition to this preference for a horizontal rather than a vertical camera trajectory, Mizoguchi, like Ozu, in defiance of Hollywood's rule that the fourth wall of any locale should always remain invisible, will show the same room from four different sides, cutting from set-up to set-up, but without ever getting inside the room's space or to the center of it. This approach is most evident in the section where Utamaro and Take, unaware of Seinosuke's threat, wait for Okita's return in her private quarters at the teahouse.

According to Pascal Bonitzer, Mizoguchi's cinema is based on a longing for quiet contemplation and stoic endurance, for female passivity and tranquil landscapes, for death-like stillness and flat waters, because traveling into space or seeing in depth summons a sense of masculine mastery and phallographic violence:

It is precisely perforation, penetration which the *mise-en-scène* keeps at bay, off-screen. Mizoguchi's cinema is based thematically and formally, on the horror of the father. . . . The horror of the father and that one of perforation are the same thing. (Bonitzer 1981, 30)

In contrast to this fear of penetration, where the risk of seeing too much goes hand in hand with a need to keep violence off-screen, and with an anxiety about the sexual act, the camera movement usually associated with Utamaro whenever he steps into the role of benevolent father is a lateral track that follows him and Seinosuke walking across his living quarters from one side of the frame to the opposite.

Besides the American censors' dislike of violent scenes,<sup>13</sup> Mizoguchi's

rejection of deep space also explains why we never see Okita's dagger penetrating Shōzaburō's and Tagasode's bodies. Likewise we do not witness the tattooing of Tagasode's back. We only observe Utamaro painting on her skin. After taking over the samurai's sword, the painter's brush replaces the tattooist's needle. Mizoguchi alludes to this troublesome object through a medium close-up of Seinosuke's dangling sword as he storms into the deep corridor leading into the room where the tattooist is waiting for the end of Utamaro's preparatory work.

Okita's weapon, however, appears as a dark silhouette behind a white, paper-thin screen, as if it were a prop in a Chinese shadow play, an archetypal form of cinema whose potential to show too much violence Mizoguchi chastizes in the final murder scene. Mizoguchi's ellipsis of Okita's dagger penetrating Shōzaburō's and Tagasode's skin echoes his avoidance of precious art historical citations. This means that there is a double bind between art and death, in the sense that Okita's violence creates an absence into the narrative with a positive, liberating quality.

In particular the allusion to Chinese shadows, to the play of light and darkness as the stuff of Mizoguchi's and Utamaro's art, reappears twice: first, when in the midst of a creative block Utamaro asks Take to close all the windows and bring in a candle-light; secondly, when in depicting Oran, we and Utamaro see her undressing behind a fragile, transparent screen that does not quite block the dim lighting used for the room. These repeated efforts to readjust the light in order to create, or to paint by seeing the object in a special kind of light that nearly transfigures it into a phantom of desire, or an evanescent form, suggest that Mizoguchi in *Utamaro* is fine-tuning his definition of the cinema as shadow-play in relation to woodblock printing and tattooing.<sup>14</sup>

By downplaying the clarity of backgrounds through complex camera set-ups, Mizoguchi exorcises his fear of becoming the evil father or the institutional authority which painfully splits communities, conquers space, dips the tattooist's tool into the skin, and markets the body of women. This uneasiness with depth also accounts for why, by the end of the film, Utamaro is no longer a positive paternal figure who negotiates between men and women, but an outcast just like Yukie. After Seinosuke's departure, she finds herself lingering alone on the edge of the shot, while her father turns his back to her by occupying the center of the image as he sits in front of a traditional painting. In a similar fashion, at the end of his punishment from the shogun – who has obliged him to spend fifty days

with his hands tied, unable to work – Utamaro does not join his friends for a celebration with sake, but returns to the marginal position in which we first encountered him, sitting on the border of the image, at the very limit between society and self.

Mizoguchi's contradictory portrait of Utamaro as mediator and divider not only indicates an ambivalent perception of the cinema as an apparatus of ideological control and of psychological rebellion, but also applies to Okita's unshaken determination and embrace of death as desire in contrast to the other characters' narrower options. On one hand, Mizoguchi's tendency in *Utamaro* to keep the camera glued to his actors in a sort of steady medium shot contributes to the creation of a tight environment. On the other, the unconventional nature of Utamaro's art reverberates in Okita's decision to control one form of serialized mechanical reproduction, the press, for she buys all the newspapers reporting that her lover, Shōzaburō, has eloped with Tagasode.

In contrast to other characters who become accessories to the settings, anonymous silhouettes slightly protruding in the background, Okita manages to personalize her environment when she puts on makeup in front of a small mirror, shortly before disagreeing with Utamaro about her affair with Seinosuke. This scene establishes an intriguing parallel between feminine cosmetics and artistic creativity. The fact that a double bind of beauty and death, liberation and repression exists between them is further conveyed by their position in the shot when they sit leaning against their respective backs, facing away from each other in nearly opposite directions.

Besides rejecting the cuts of editing and impeding vision in depth, Mizoguchi challenges the centrality of the actors as carriers of meaning in the narrative. In this respect the director's style does not satisfy the American censors' interest in films that would assert personal values. Mizoguchi's downplaying of individual psychology reminds us that the genre of the portrait is for the most part absent from the Japanese art historical tradition.<sup>15</sup> Even though Utamaro was often praised for his *okubi-e*, or closer views of courtesans, hairstyle and dress are far more charged with meaningful information than the faces of his sitters. To be sure, the identity of his female subjects was often indicated, if not in a cartouche, by means of a family crest on the kimono or by objects held in the hands. In addition, physical differences were limited to such minor details as the shapes of the noses (Murase 1986, 220). In a sense, Mizoguchi's disinterest in the faces

of his main characters emphasizes their status as agents of a wider social organization which contains them much in the same manner that his backgrounds drain all physiognomy out of nameless figurines who either stand with no task or sit and wait in the remotest corners of the shot.

While Mizoguchi's sacrifice of individual traits to decor suggests a sense of constraint, it also echoes Utamaro's attempt to create a society around himself in order to function better as an artist. In fact, as soon as Okita and Utamaro argue about her liaison with Seinosuke, the artist's creative drive withers. Put another way, even though he is a rebel, Utamaro's desire to live in a world where individuals fit in with each other summons a basic conformist drive in Japanese society.

According to Linda Ehrlich (1990, 4), in Japan, it is important to remain part of a larger whole, "reflected not only in Nature, but also in ties to other persons."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, this sense of needing each other reappears in Mizoguchi's domestic settings where small indoor gardens or painted screens or *kakemono* of landscapes not only blur the distinction between inside and outside, but also convey a longing for a natural harmony and for a return to a motherly embrace. It is well known that the human figurines that often stand at the very bottom of Japanese landscape paintings are summoned by the natural world in front of them, while the depiction of mountains and rivers is usually played out along a mere vertical axis, with no depth whatsoever, as if the landscape and its inhabitants existed exactly on the very same coordinates. This is perhaps why, in preparation for the painful marks of a tattoo artist, Utamaro graces the back of Tagasode with an image of Kintoki, a Japanese equivalent of young Hercules, who happily rests in the arms of his mother Yama Uba. This legendary couple of woman and child clearly exists beyond the tensions produced by sexual difference which fuel the intricacies of *Utamaro's* plot. It is important to remember, however, that Yama Uba is both a witch of the mountains and a seductress. Thus in contrast to Kunieda's use of a different folk character, Kikujido, for the very same episode in his novel, Mizoguchi might have chosen Yama Uba to indicate that his film was meant to work through his attachment to and his fear of women, a split stance grafted onto the scenario of castration.

#### PAINTING THE BODY, EMPTYING THE FILMIC IMAGE

Just as the cinema can lead to freedom or constraint, tattooing in *Utamaro* is a double-edged medium. In marking the body, it is a form of violence,

penetration, and possession. Mizoguchi seems to signal the links between tattooing, cutting, and the patriarchal order he rejects by having the tattoo bleed, so to speak, across the narrative, which literally develops along a chain of deadly betrayals. While tattooing can be seen as one of the ways in which phallocracy leaves its mark on the individual's psyche, this controversial aesthetic practice may also exalt the body as art in order to make a highly personal statement of fantasy and desire. Utamaro's decision to paint the body of Tagasode is not only a radical gesture against the Kanō school, which often worked on silk, but is also antithetical to the reduction of art to commerce. Unlike images that could be serialized and sold again and again with the advent of mechanical reproduction, the tattoo cannot be separated from the body, and, for this reason, it asserts that the individual is unique, while it violates important conventions of markets and prices in the institutional art world.

The tattoo scene is not totally fictional to the extent that tattooing does appear in a few woodblock prints by Utamaro. Among the courtesans of the pleasure quarters of Edo and Osaka, tattoos were love pledges wherein the name of the courtesan's lover would appear on her upper arm or inner thigh. A print by Utamaro – *Azamino of Onitsutaya Tattooing Gontaro* at the Boston Museum of Fine Art – shows just such a situation, although in this case we see the woman tattooing her lover, who is wincing with pain. By inserting himself in the tattooing process as the creator of an image to be used later by the tattooist, who sits nearby in awe of Tagasode's perfectly white skin, Utamaro goes against his own art, for woodblock printing, like the cinema, is based on mechanical reproduction. Thus the artist works against his own medium of representation in order to get to something new. This is why, on his way to the tattoo room, Utamaro defiantly declares to Take that he will become involved in this forbidden activity at the cost of dying, that is, of becoming himself a ghost.

The quasi-religious atmosphere and the dim lighting of the spacious room used for the tattoo scene summon the magical origins of this folk art, which was also deployed in the context of initiation rituals. Precisely because tattooing was taboo during the Edo period, its practice applied to very special and to very marginal people who wanted either to define themselves as anticonformist or to protest against the strict regulations of the shogun.<sup>17</sup> Most important, the tattoo scene helps us to explain why the director's style in *Utamaro* is based on a denial of visibility. Except for the episode where Utamaro paints Kintoki and Yama Uba on Tagasode's

back, the tattoo remains invisible for most of the narrative. We only hear about it, instead of seeing it, when Okita interrogates two men in the countryside during her search for Shōzaburō. At last, the tattoo becomes visible in conjunction with Tagasode's death, as soon as her clothes are moved aside and her skin glares in the darkness, at the bottom margin of the shot.

In fact, the whole idea of turning the body into art and of achieving invisibility through tattooing derives from a Buddhist legend that Mizoguchi staged on the set a few years later during a pause in production while he was at work on *Ugetsu monogatari* (1953). A famous photograph shows Mizoguchi standing by the painter Kainosho, who, with a brush in mid-air, places Zen calligraphy, a form of picture-writing, on the wide back of Mori Masayuki, *Ugetsu's* male protagonist. As the ending *-osho* suggests, besides being an artist, Kainosho is also a Buddhist priest. His double identity matches the character of an immensely popular Japanese folk tale which functions as the transgressive subtext of *Utamaro*. To my knowledge there is no statement by Mizoguchi on this specific legend, but he must have known it since the story of Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi is as popular in Japan as Little Red Riding Hood in the Western world.

Unable as I am to locate specific and direct statements by Mizoguchi on tattooing or on Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi, I am here coming up against a question of intentionality. I can attempt to circumvent this issue only by pointing out that since *Utamaro* is a film about the life of an artist, the connection between him and Mizoguchi is so obvious that intentionality exists in the mode of identification with the Japanese artistic tradition. As a result of this overpowering congruence between the artist in the text and the director of the film, we can feel free to look outside the text, into the collective unconscious of the national culture to which the legend of Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi does belong.

According to the tradition,<sup>18</sup> a blind artist named Hoichi, famous for his skill in recitation and in playing the *biwa*,<sup>19</sup> lived in the temple of the Amidaji, where a Buddhist priest was very fond of poetry and music. At one point the priest was called away to perform a service at the house of a dead parishioner, so that the blind Hoichi remained alone in the temple. During the night the *biwa* player unknowingly followed a ghost, who brought Hoichi to the palace of his lord and asked him to perform. It was only when the priest returned to the temple that Hoichi's contact with the evil ghost became apparent for the servants discovered him playing the

*biwa* all night long among the tombs of the Heike. Everything the blind man had imagined was a mere illusion except for the calling of the dead.

In order to protect Hoichi from this evil, nocturnal ghost, the priest turned to his writing brushes and covered Hoichi's body with a holy spell called *Hannya-Shin-Kyo*, or the "Heart Sutra," a text in Chinese script which, through the Doctrine of the Emptiness of Forms, describes the unreal character of all things. The sutra went as follows:

Form is emptiness; and emptiness is form. Emptiness is not different from form; form is not different from emptiness. What is form – that is emptiness. What is emptiness that is form . . . Perception, name, concept, and knowledge are also emptiness . . . There is no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind . . . But when the envelopment of consciousness has been annihilated, then he [the seeker] becomes free from all fear, and beyond the reach of change, enjoying final Nirvâna. (Hearn 1985, 326n)

By turning Hoichi's body into an artistic text, the priest made the *biwa* player invisible to the evil ghost. Unfortunately the priest's assistant forgot to paint Hoichi's ears, so that, during his next nocturnal visit, the ghost was able to pull this part of Hoichi's body away, leaving the blind man bleeding and mutilated for some time, until he eventually healed.

The story of Earless Hoichi accounts for Mizoguchi's decision to put Kainosho to work on Masayuki's back, since the protagonist of *Ugetsu* is an artist, a potter, who falls in love with a female ghost. Mizoguchi's passion for ceramics and pottery is well known and once again the director used a fictional character to explore his artistic self.

In *Utamaro*, the centrality of the tattoo scene, by virtue of its spaciousness, clarity, and intensity, makes even more emphatic the claustrophobic, distancing, and anti-anthropomorphic quality of the scenes in the rest of the film. In other words, the director's cinematic style strives to achieve the spell of invisibility cast by the Buddhist priest on Hoichi's body. Furthermore, the fact that the *biwa* player is blind can be said to be in line with Mizoguchi's downplaying of the spectacle of the female body and with his elision of sensual art historical citations.

Mizoguchi relies on the tattoo scene to confront his sexual as well as his family ghosts through art, precisely because, by being inseparable from the body, the tattoo can function as mental expansion of one's own psychic energy, for the tattooed body is the visible, breathing, and indelible image of all sorts of desires and fears which an individual carries on him-

self, inside himself, and can never ignore. In short, tattooing points not only to the legend of Earless Hoichi but also to one of the most violent experiences in Mizoguchi's contact with women. In 1925 he fell in love with a Kyoto waitress and began living with her. The relationship lasted only two months before the woman attacked him with a razor and, by staging a veritable scenario of castration, slashed his back while he was sitting in a bathtub. Years later when he first showed his scar to his screenwriter and friend Yoshikata Yoda, he admonished, "Yoda, women are terrifying." Torn between his anxieties about castration and his desire to rebel against paternal authority, Mizoguchi spoke in favor of his mistress during the trial, forgave her, quit work, and went looking for her again. They were reconciled, and he lived off her income as a maid in a Japanese inn until an acquaintance warned him that he was wasting his artistic talent. Eventually Mizoguchi pursued his filmmaking with a vitality that had been lacking prior to the woman's violent gesture. Meanwhile the mistress he had left behind disappeared into prostitution.

It is easy to see how the plot of *Utamaro* has an autobiographical flavor, since it is Okita's violence which stimulates the artist's creativity.<sup>20</sup> This means that Mizoguchi's art thrives on absence. Were we to read Mizoguchi's experience in real life in the light of the legend of Earless Hoichi, we could conclude that *Utamaro*, as a film, is more than a meditation on the revolutionary and oppressive aspects of the cinema which parallel the double-edged nature of woodblock printing as rebellion against the traditional system of the arts and as commerce instrumental to a mercantile class aspiring to the status quo. In fact *Utamaro* is also an attempt to redefine the cinema through tattooing in such a way as to turn castration anxiety upside down and transform its haunting connotations into positive, artistic production, for only this reversal can free Mizoguchi of his paranoia about paternal authority and masculine power.

When he applies his brush to Tagasode's back, *Utamaro* is Mizoguchi, who becomes the woman who inflicted on him a terrible wound. Even if *Utamaro* keeps saying to his female model of the moment "I want your body," this is really a film about the male body, the director's wound. Thus, in painting Tagasode's back, Mizoguchi chooses a very difficult strategy to hold on to, and it is this untenable approach which might explain the unresolved flavor of the film's ending. In other words, the director adopts simultaneously the position of object and subject, of victim and attacker, a feminine persona and the role of the artist-priest.

Such an argument begins to find confirmation in the fact that, while Utamaro produced highly erotic prints and did not hesitate to show his sitters' sexual organs, the whole genre of the female nude as a fantasy of desire or allegory of truth offered by the male artist to the male viewer does not exist in Japanese art the way it does in the West. As a reminder of castration, the female body, in *Utamaro*, has to remain invisible, while its absence is echoed by the director's disinterest in the seductive power of art historical citations.

If *Utamaro* is a film about the male body, it is also and most of all an attempt to overcome the pain of sexual difference. This is why the crossing of the boundary, or of the difference, between male and female, which is implied in castration, reappears in two minor, comic characters of *Utamaro*: Take, Utamaro's assistant, is effeminate, emotional, and docile. He turns into caricature the tradition of the weak, passive male (*nimaimé*), which Japanese melodrama derives from Buddhism and Confucianism, two religions that notoriously encourage passivity. Oshin, Take's future wife, is strong, aggressive, and muscular. Yet her physical prowess and ultimate obedience to Take do not buy her the same quality of inner freedom achieved by Okita through violence and death. While Oshin is free to marry Take because her debt to the teahouse has been satisfied, her future as a traditional Japanese wife, under Utamaro's benevolent auspices, is more comparable to a revised state of being rather than to a radical change of position. Finally, the iconography of the film reasserts the idea that the passage from life to death chosen by Okita as a result of her jealousy is not just one more manifestation of women's suffering, but a transgression that reverberates with potentially positive connotations across two sites: the huge gate marking the entrance at Yoshiwara, while the credits roll on the screen, and the bridge Tagasode and Shōzaburō walk on during their elopement in the countryside.<sup>21</sup>

To sum up, the director's argument for the Americans that *Utamaro* would be a film about an artist of the people barely scratches the surface of this complex text that would like to solve the plight of Japanese women through Buddhist religious philosophy. Utamaro's tied wrists bear witness to Mizoguchi's frustrating search for a new way of working, between Hollywood and Japan, in a rapidly changing society right after the war. Just as Okita goes as far as redefining love through death, Mizoguchi turns to the national culture of the past to raise questions about the achievement of freedom or the perpetuation of oppression through the cinema, a medium

whose split vocation matches Utamaro's contradictory roles of benevolent father and destructive influence. In this respect Tadao Satō was quite on the mark in his insight that Mizoguchi did not create anything new, but his artistic genius consisted in deepening an ancient tradition through a modern sensibility.<sup>22</sup> While comparing his own medium to other arts such as woodblock printing and tattooing, through a distancing film style and an elision of art historical citations, Mizoguchi creates his own sutra where the equivalence of Form with Emptiness wards off the evil ghost of sexual difference.

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## Notes and References

I wish to thank J. Dudley Andrew, Mimi Yiengpruksawan, Glen Elliott, Megumi Kusuda, and Taori and Hiroshi Takahagi for their help with this essay.

1. According to Richard Lane (1978, 141), "the only real offenses in the eyes of the law were publication of seditious matter and publication without the censor's seal of approval. The publication of pornography as such was not considered a very serious crime, and as late as Koryusai in the 1770s, artists often signed their true names to their erotica. When at last Utamaro did run into difficulties with the authorities . . . , it was not for his erotica but for some uncensored historical prints depicting the sixteenth-century Shogun Hideyoshi, whose heir had been deposed by the current Tokugawa regime and about whom the governors naturally felt the pangs of a guilty conscience."

2. Mizoguchi shot *Forty-Seven Ronin*, a two-part tale of collective suicide (*seppuku*) in the name of a samurai's honor, in 1941 and 1942. The film is absolutely stunning and worth seeing. Hirano (1992, 66) remarks that "Many prewar film versions of *Forty-Seven Ronin* were banned from the Japanese screen until the end of the occupation, although stage production of the story had reappeared by November 1947."

3. The official ban on prostitution went into effect in 1956.

4. Bock (1978, 40) cites Matsuo Kishi as quoted by Tadao Satō: "Mizo was 'unusual in the extent to which he suffered at the hands of women. He hated women; he was contemptuous of women. On the other hand, when he fell in love, it was with the sincerity of a little boy.' "

5. Bock (1978, 40): "When she went insane in 1941 due to 'hereditary syphilis'

in Mizoguchi's words, he had her institutionalized for the rest of her life. After the Pacific War, he took his wife's widowed sister and her two daughters into his home out of pity. He lived with his sister-in-law as a wife, but proposed marriage to his leading actress, Kinuyo Tanaka, around 1947. She refused him and from 1953 on would have nothing further to do with him because he tried to prevent her from directing her first film."

6. Let us set this scene against Kyoko Hirano's research in *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo*: "The first public striptease show was staged in November 1947 in a small theater in Tokyo, and was received enthusiastically. It was produced by the Toho Theatrical Company in a 'frameshow' format, in which young women posed on the stage behind a large frame, imitating famous Western and Japanese seminude paintings and thus imparting an artistic, pseudosophisticated flair to the show" (Hirano 1992, 163).

7. Hillier (1979, 28–29) writes: "Edo was the capital of . . . a police-state, with many of the evils we have come to associate with totalitarianism – repressions, secret police, rigid censorship, and banishments; . . . The years 1780 to 1792 are noted in the annals of Japan as a period of starvation and misery."

8. According to Webber (1979, 7), "The making of the traditional Japanese woodblock print involved several individuals in the process – the artist, the woodcarver, the printer, and the publisher."

9. "Until the seventeenth century, painting was an art largely performed and enjoyed by the restricted circle of the aristocracy, but it was widely appreciated within that circle – appreciation of painting was one of the accomplishments that every man of breeding was expected to possess, along with the ability to write an artistic hand, and to compose a neat verse extempore" (Hillier 1979, 11).

10. Murase (1986, 219) writes: "Utamaro is known to have studied painting with Toriyama Sekien (1712–1788), an artist trained in the orthodox Kanō School who also worked as an illustrator of books." Hillier (1979, 16) observes that "In landscape – usually, with Utamaro, only the background to his prints – he often shows the Kanō touch, and when, in an interior, he depicts a painted screen or *kakemono*, . . . it is invariably in the Kanō manner."

11. "[I]n most of Mizoguchi's films, there are characters who function as go-betweens within the stories. They either mediate between other characters or manipulate the action by themselves. This figure has a real counterpart in Japanese society (formalised in arranged marriages or informal industrial mediation) and it is a permanent fixture of consensus democracy" (Cohen 1978, 118).

12. "[B]ecause of the relative freedom of behavior in the pleasure quarters, the ukiyo-e world was more receptive to women painters than were traditional workshops. The more liberal view toward women was reflected in the popular fiction of the day which often depicted women as daring and brazen, not the meek creatures praised in Confucian texts" (Fister 1988, 47–48).

13. On Mizoguchi's *Utamaro* and censorship, see Hirano (1992, 75): "Murders were objectionable if they were presented without any moral judgements. On seeing Kenji Mizoguchi's *Utamaro and Five Women* (1947), George Gercke of CIE opined that showing a character killing to avenge his failure in love was not desirable because it could influence young people harmfully."

14. In his book *In Praise of Shadows*, possibly a source for Roland Barthes's *The Empire of Signs*, Junichiro Tanizaki writes: "we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates" (Tanizaki 1977, 30).

15. "Portraiture, a 'likeness' in the western manner, was hardly ever attempted by Japanese artists: there were rare exceptions, such as the occasional portraits of a priest or a memorial portrait of some personage of note, posthumously painted and probably quite unreliable. . . . 'Utamaro, however, did produce many half-length "portraits" of women especially between 1791-1793, but these images have to do more with mood and not so much with individuality" (Hillier 1979, 70).

16. David Desser (1988, 111) writes: "Romantic love in Mizoguchi's films is therefore closer to the classic mother-son relationship that critics of Japanese culture see as so crucial."

17. Arnold Rubin (1988, 119-120) writes: "In tracing the history of the Edo tattoo, it is essential to recognize that this practice was harshly sanctioned by the authorities. . . . At the highest economic level of society, merchants were constantly being criticized for extravagance and ostentatious display. More on the level that includes groups likely to indulge in tattooing, there were frequent restrictions, even prohibitions, on cultural forms such as the Kabuki drama, Ukiyo-e wood-block prints, and various types of popular literature." Two other books have helped me to develop ideas on tattooing: Martelli (1980) and Sanders (1989).

18. See Hearn (1985, 319-328). Born in Ireland, Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) settled in Japan, where his wife, Setsuko Koizumi, helped him to gather old Japanese folk tales. As a journalist and as a writer, Hearn poured out book after book about his adopted land. Through his stories and folklore, Hearn is widely known to young and old in Japan. His work was influenced by Irish folklore, writings, and ghost stories that he heard and read in his formative years in Ireland.

19. The *biwa*, a kind of four-stringed lute, is chiefly used in musical recitative. Formerly the professional minstrels who recited the *Heike monogatari*, and other tragic histories, were called *biwa-hoshi*, or "lute-priests." The origin of this appellation is not clear; but it is possible that it may have been due to the fact that "lute-priests" had shaven heads.

20. "The raging jealous woman would be a part of the realism of Mizoguchi's later films, notably in the 1946 *Utamaro and his Five Women*, which Yoda wrote using Mizo as the real-life model for *Utamaro*" (Bock 1978, 38-39).

21. The motif of lovers walking across the “Floating Bridge of Dreams,” a metaphor for the insubstantial beauty of life, often reappears in Utamaro’s prints.

22. Satō (1980, 15): “Kenji Mizoguchi lived in a tradition of the old Japanese esthetic, yet he was an artist who succeeded in adding something modern to the heart of that tradition.” This essay by Satō has been translated by Paul Andrew and appears with an introduction by Dudley Andrew.

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# Marginality and Centrality: The Myth of Asia in 1970s Hollywood

GLENN MAN

MANY OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT Hollywood films in the late 1960s and mid-1970s were progressive in nature. They questioned American capitalistic society, its materialistic values, puritanical attitudes, and hypocritical double standards. Films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Godfather, Part II* (1974), *Chinatown* (1974), *The Conversation* (1974), and *Nashville* (1975) proposed counter myths to the traditional American story of benevolence and fair play in order to expose an unbridled capitalism as the root of the physical and psychical violence in modern American society. Other films such as *The Graduate* (1967), *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Carnal Knowledge* (1972), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Lenny* (1974), and *Taxi Driver* (1976) placed a stethoscope on the pulse of such feverish issues of the period as American sexual mores, the counterculture, the generation gap, and the disillusionment and alienation of individuals in the face of dominant cultural attitudes and social structures.

The progressive nature of these films parallels the progressive attitudes of the time, fostered by the civil rights movement, the counterculture movement, the women's movement, the agitation against the Vietnam war, and the political deception of Watergate. The subversion of the dominant ideology in these films was often accompanied and accomplished by a rupture in the classical Hollywood paradigm and its so-called invisible style. Many of these films broke or seriously modified the traditional Hollywood narrative either by disrupting its structure, upsetting stereotypes, blurring the customary distinction between good and evil, mixing styles

and genres, foregrounding the cinematic apparatus, overdetermining conventional codes, or by formulating unsatisfying resolutions or no resolutions at all. Among other things, the violation of the classical paradigm exposed the way classical narration itself works to empower prosocial forces through centering and subject positioning, while it marginalizes or excludes by absence those forces that would either throw into relief the former's repressive control or threaten its dominant position.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the context of this critique of the dominant ideology and its handmaiden, the classical Hollywood paradigm and its "invisible" style, in the 1970s, that I wish to illustrate the depiction of Asians in three films of the period, Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, released in 1971; the Robert Towne–Roman Polanski collaboration, *Chinatown*, released in 1974; and Michael Cimino's *The Deerhunter*, released in 1977. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Chinatown*, Asians figure centrally in undermining the myth of American patriarchy, while in *The Deerhunter*, their classic status as the yellow peril serves to empower the film's American white male subjects, even as other elements deconstruct the myth of American capitalism.

In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Chinatown*, minorities such as Asians and Afro-Americans exist as marginal figures, relegated to the background and forced to play roles determined by the dominant white culture. Assuming positions of subservience and inferiority, they occupy the screen frame as objects shunted off to the side, only glimpsed at or ignored by the white male subjects, John McCabe (Warren Beatty) and Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson). Ethnic minorities possess differences that are not acknowledged and left to flourish, but denied and transformed into an "otherness" to be utilized by and for power.<sup>2</sup> In other words, minorities figure as necessary elements in the white male subject's construction of a myth of dominance. In exposing the process by which difference translates into "otherness" for the purposes of exploitation and punishment, both films undermine the myth of power by revealing its basis in a falsehood and by underlining its bigotry and racism.

In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the Chinese who work in the mines in the Pacific Northwest occupy a shanty town area of the growing community of Presbyterian Church. They exist marginally on the fringes of society and the screen frame. The camera captures a glimpse of the Chinese as they come out from their Chinatown shanties to see the arrival of Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie) on a steam engine. Later in the film, a black couple,

Sumner Washington and his wife, arrives in town with Mrs. Miller's whores. Sumner becomes part of Presbyterian Church as the town's barber. However, like the Chinese, he and his wife exist on the fringes of society, discreetly keeping to themselves as a protective measure. For example, we see them silently observing a street fight they dare take no part in; at the end, they help put out the church fire, but walk away alone, unable to join the ensuing celebration.

The film conveys the diminishment of minorities not only through visual means as it limits their time on screen and isolates them in space from the central actions, but also through the crude remarks and jokes about them. The Chinese are the special targets of these vulgarities, prompted by the perception of their physical and imagined differences. At the beginning, McCabe, the white male subject of the film, asks Sheehan, owner of the restaurant, bar, and boarding house, "You got many chinks around here?" Sheehan replies, "Oh, just turn over a rock," but then assures McCabe that he doesn't rent rooms to "chinks": "I sell whiskey; I don't tolerate opium smokers here." When the whores arrive, one of them is Chinese, and one of the other girls refuses to take a bath with her in the same tub. Three men in the bar share their racist jokes about Chinese women, how their bodies are slanted just like their eyes. One of the men says he paid \$5 to see if it was true, and says that it is true. The third one remarks, "Oh, come on; if that was true, their legs would fall off!" The crudities in this conversation cash in on imagined differences in order to denigrate and by denigrating, to dominate. But the non sequitur of the last remark – if it were true that their bodies were slanted, their legs would fall off – subverts the dominant impulse to degrade others because they look different since it exposes the illogic of this perception.

The idea that Asians are a cheap and expendable commodity used to line the pockets of big business is given vivid expression by Dog Butler, the gun hired by the mining corporation to exterminate McCabe, who refused to sell his business properties at a reasonable price. As McCabe walks in on Butler to bargain with him, Butler advises the town to use the Chinese to dynamite the mines. He says that "the wealth of the town lies in Chinkyville, right down there in Chinatown," then goes on to detail how the company sends the "pigtails" down the shaft, which results in "one dead Chinaman along with the rocks." The fine for killing a Chinaman is only \$50, and besides, "four out of five inspectors call it an accident." "All you got to do," he says, "is give the bugger a box, put him down the rock



*Figure 1. John McCabe and Constance Miller: The central white male and female identified with the “other”—the Chinese shunted off into the background and marginal spaces of the mise-en-scène. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.*

hole and up to the rock face and there it is.” The film is making a parallel here between McCabe and the Chinese. Ironically, McCabe, the white male subject of the film, has been targeted by the Harrison-Shaughnessy mine company because he chooses to be different. He is the successful small-time entrepreneur who resists the monopolistic takeover. As a result, he is like the Chinese, an expendable commodity in the company’s capitalistic scheme, and Dog Butler’s disdainful, heartless attitude to-

wards McCabe is analogous to his racist attitude to the Chinese. It doesn't matter that McCabe was just acting the swaggering businessman with the company's agents when they came to bargain, holding out for the highest price he could get. His foolishness has cost him his place in the capitalist scheme of Presbyterian Church. He is now the "other" who needs to be exterminated, so that the "civilizing" of the west by big business may progress unimpeded.

In *Adventure, Mystery, Romance*, John Cawelti notes how modernist westerns such as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* depict the victimization of "others" in the development of American society: "The search for a new western myth expresses the view that violence has been the underlying force in the development of American society and that all modern white Americans are implicated in guilt for their aggressive destruction of other ways of life" (Cawelti 1976, 259). McCabe's defiance of the company's takeover separates him from the crowd and links him to the "other ways of life." He becomes an "other" like the Chinese and the Blacks, dominated and regulated by those in control.

Marginal figures in the society of Presbyterian Church and within the screen space, ethnic minorities occupy a central position within the symbolic and thematic landscape of the film, providing an analogue to the status and victimization of McCabe at the end. They also provide an analogue to Constance Miller, but her status as "other" is clear from the beginning, for she is representative of the other minority in American society, the woman. Women's subservient role as commodity for men is exacerbated in this movie because all the women are whores or bought brides like Ida (Shelley Duvall), whose only recourse after her husband dies is to become a prostitute in Mrs. Miller's brothel. Constance Miller may be a heroic female figure who proves in the course of the film that she can talk, smoke, eat, and belch like a man, handle her women expertly, and upstage McCabe in handling the business end of the brothel, but she is still a prostitute whose only dream of escape is an escape onto a higher level of subservience: to sell out to the mining company, move to San Francisco, and open a boarding house. When McCabe shatters her dream by his foolish ploy to hold out in order to raise their property's value, she is condemned to remain in her present role. The film identifies Mrs. Miller with the Asian "other" through her smoking of opium, a way for her to blunt her constant victimization. The end of the film punctuates her status as "other" by forming parallels between her, McCabe, and the Chinese. As

McCabe battles the gunmen in the streets, Mrs. Miller is in the opium den in the Chinese section. At the very end, the filmic apparatus cuts from a zoom-in closeup of Mrs. Miller's face in the opium den to a zoom-in closeup of McCabe's dying figure in the snow, and then back to a closeup of Mrs. Miller's face, the camera zooming into an extreme closeup of the dazed pupil of her right eye. The parallel editing links the two as doomed figures, and the zoom-ins to closeups stress their entrapment, their circumscription and containment by the myths the dominant ideology inscribes to exploit others and expand its control.

*Chinatown* functions in a similar way to expose capitalistic America's bigotry, racism, and sexism, its streamlining of other ways of life or its destruction of those who choose to resist. As *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* debunked the classic western myth, *Chinatown* deconstructs the classic hard-boiled detective myth in order to accomplish this end. In the classic film of the genre, *The Maltese Falcon* (1942), Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade retains a moral integrity without compromise and is effective in bringing to justice the perpetrators of the crime. Jack Nicholson's Jake Gittes, on the other hand, has bought into the system by choosing the morally compromising divorce work, snooping into other people's personal affairs as a lucrative endeavor. Gittes's materialistic goals co-opt the traditional code of the detective hero. Yet another sign of his compromise is his bigoted, racist, and chauvinist attitude. In 1942, Bogart's Sam Spade's patriarchal white male values went unquestioned, even validated by his successful enactment of the myth of the private eye. In 1974, however, Nicholson's Gittes cannot escape scrutiny. The film exposes his white male perspective for what it is, a hypocritical, skewed attitude that denigrates minorities and discredits women, even as it privileges that perspective as its subject and filter for the events.

As in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, Asians are marginal figures, both in the drama played out by the central characters and within the screen space. In the film's 1939 Los Angeles, they act out their stereotypical roles as servants to the upper middle class, in this case, servants to Hollis and Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway). We first see them when Gittes visits Evelyn Mulwray with information about her husband's murder. To Gittes's central position as subject, they are accessories in the household. The filmic apparatus frames each of them, the Chinese butler, the Chinese maid, and the Japanese gardener, from Gittes's perspective by over-the-shoulder shots and deep-focus photography. One particular sequence emblemizes

their marginal positions to his central one. As Gittes walks through the hall to the doors leading to the garden, he is centered in the frame, while the Chinese maid dusts the furniture off to the right of the screen; as he walks through the door and into the garden, an over-the-shoulder shot reveals the Japanese gardener in the background in deep focus, the object of Gittes's gaze. The butler is out of sight completely, having gone to fetch Mrs. Mulwray.

Later, the servants support Evelyn in her attempt to hide her daughter-sister, Katherine, from her father, Noah Cross (John Huston), who wants custody of his daughter-granddaughter. Gittes suggests that Evelyn and Katherine hide in her servants' apartment in Chinatown to await their escape to Mexico. Even in Chinatown itself the Asians are relegated to being mere observers on their own turf. The butler and his wife first accompany Evelyn and Katherine to their getaway car. However, they are pushed aside by the police, who suspect Evelyn for the murder of her husband, and by Noah Cross, who wants Katherine. After the police kill a fleeing Evelyn, and Noah Cross leads Katherine away, a crowd of Asians gathers round, silently watching from an assigned position on the fringe, excluded from the central drama.

Gittes's own part in the exclusion of minorities from the centers of power results from his racist and sexist attitude. His attitude toward Asians is indicated by the Chinaman joke he tells with great relish and enjoyment to his male colleagues. Meanwhile, his sexist attitude is conveyed through his cynicism about women because of what he thinks is their penchant for infidelity and jealousy, all the result of the skewed perspective he develops from his job as a snoop for divorce cases. In the first instance, Gittes's Chinaman joke plays upon the stereotype of orientals as mysterious sexual beings given to ingenious inventiveness and endurance to gain exquisite pleasure. It also plays upon white males' fear of an oriental sexual takeover of their women; the joke is on the white male protagonist, who ironically discovers his own cuckoldry by using his Chinese rival's sexual techniques on his wife. Furthermore, the Chinaman joke also feeds into Gittes's sexist attitude, since it implicitly projects a distrust of women. The woman in the joke is by inference unfaithful, and in the most degraded way by sleeping with an Asian.<sup>3</sup>

Gittes's distrust of women derives from his experience as a divorce detective. At the beginning of the film, he shows his client, Curly, pictures of Curly's wife making love in various positions with another man. Curly's

response is a macho one; he punches his wife out to put her in her place. We see her later sullenly silent with a black eye, feeding Curly and her screaming children. Gittes himself slaps Evelyn Mulwray around when he suspects her of killing her husband because her husband had an affair with a young girl. His clichéd response to the jealous-wife syndrome blinds him to the real murderer, Noah Cross, and the true relationships among Evelyn, her husband, her father, and the young girl, Katherine. When he does find out, the truth merely illustrates yet another instance of male brutality towards the female other, a brutality directed towards the imagined threat of woman in order to disempower and control her. Noah Cross victimized Evelyn into an incestuous relationship when she was fifteen. In the film, Evelyn futilely attempts to protect Katherine, their daughter, from the same victimization by her father, who now wants custody of Katherine.<sup>4</sup>

In a vivid reading of Faye Dunaway's facial details, makeup, and lighting, Virginia Wright Wexman, in her book on Roman Polanski, links Evelyn, a sexual other for the male, to the Asian other by noting her oriental-like features: "Evelyn's image connotes not only sexual but also racial otherness, for her features are made up to give them a decidedly Oriental cast, with geisha-like bows painted on her lips under thin, rounded eyebrows. In many of her scenes full frontal lighting flattens her features into an even more striking Oriental configuration" (Wexman 1985, 98). In combining both the female other and the oriental other in her person, Evelyn functions on one level to undercut Gittes's dominating white male perspective. When Gittes tells the Chinaman joke, the *mise-en-scène* situates him in the center of the frame, but deep-focus photography undermines his role as subject by revealing Evelyn Mulwray in the background screen right. Gittes has his back turned to her as he tells his joke to his two assistants, who are in the foreground screen left. Both his assistants and Evelyn undercut Gittes's subject position because they can see the whole situation, while he cannot. Evelyn has come with her lawyer to deliver a law suit, claiming she never hired Gittes to tail her husband to gain incriminating evidence. More significantly for the purposes of this paper, Evelyn's figure in the background undercuts Gittes's white male perspective by being privy, without his knowledge, to his unabashed racial and sexist gag. Later, Evelyn will undercut Gittes's fiction of the self-sufficient private eye by proving him wrong about her husband's alleged affair and his suspicion of her as a murderess; she even solves the murder for him by telling him that the glasses he found in her saltwater garden pond cannot be

her husband's because he never wore bifocals, information that leads him to Noah Cross, the real killer.

Though Evelyn may be empowered in undermining Gittes's fiction of a dominating white male subject, she is ultimately doomed to her role of the "other," becoming the innocent victim of the authority of both the police and her father. The civil authorities shoot her as she flees from the paternal threat of Noah Cross. The police, like Gittes, buy into the cliché of the threatening jealous wife in suspecting her of Hollis Mulwray's murder. Evelyn's eye is shot out of its socket, an analogue to Curly's wife's black eye, both a sign of the brutality of male authority.



*Figure 2. Jake Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray: The alienated private eye and the disempowered femme fatale in the modern wasteland of 1939 Los Angeles. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.*

Evelyn's shooting takes place in Chinatown. The setting recalls the crime-ridden, opium-infested playground of tongs and hatchet men in the Chinatowns of Hollywood's past, in such films as *The Hatchet Man* (1932), *The Son-Daughter* (1933), *King of Chinatown* (1939), and updated more recently in *Year of the Dragon* (1983) and *China Girl* (1989). In these films, the Chinatown setting is self-contained, a kind of foreign turf, governed by its own codes, and not so much subject to the authority of the greater forces outside. In the *Son-Daughter*, for example, the inhabitants of San Francisco's Chinatown are divided into warring factions, those who support the revolution in China and those loyal to the Manchu dynasty. The loyalists are the villains, devising imaginative methods to torture those sympathetic to the cause. Murder, mayhem, and mystery are the ingredients of this Chinese gangster potboiler, as the revolutionaries succeed in the end in shipping off a supply of guns and ammunition to their brethren in the homeland. In *The Hatchet Man*, Edward G. Robinson plays an executioner for a San Francisco Chinatown tong. The tong gangs follow a code of honor that requires vengeance against anyone who breaks that code, including their own. In both films, white policemen walk through this mythic setting without having any effect, literally turning their backs to the rampant criminality.

Roman Polanski and Robert Towne play upon the Hollywood myth of Chinatown in their association of L.A.'s Chinatown with a corruption that undermines even the possibility of law and order. However, the Chinatown turf of moral disorder is not self-contained in Polanski's modernist version; it extends to include all of modern society. L.A.'s Chinatown becomes the mythic ground of lawlessness where modern man in the person of Jake Gittes ritualizes his futile gestures. Gittes tells Evelyn that he did "as little as possible" when he worked for the district attorney's office in Chinatown. Noah Cross warns Gittes, "You may think you know what you're dealing with but you don't," to which Gittes replies, "That's what the D.A. used to tell me when I worked in Chinatown." Gittes's worst fears are realized when he unwillingly retraces his steps to Chinatown and reenacts with Evelyn a past tragedy whose pattern has become part of the chaotic landscape in which he finds himself trapped. He had told Evelyn that he quit the police force out of disillusionment because, "I was trying to keep someone from being hurt; I ended up making sure she was hurt." In attempting to help Evelyn escape from Noah Cross and the

police, Gittes only leads her to her death. The upshot of his actions is that the police conveniently pin the murder on the dead Evelyn, while Cross goes free to realize his money-making scheme and victimize Katherine.

Gittes's gestures to reveal the real murderer and obtain justice are futile in the Chinatown wasteland of modern society. His victimization links him with the oppressed women and Asians in the film, for he becomes the "other" as well. Despite his own moral compromise, he still holds out hope for justice in a corrupt environment, setting him apart from the accepted submission to the "way things are." In other words, Gittes, the individual who dares to be different, is defeated as all minorities are by an entrenched capitalistic ideology that parades a democratic facade, but in fact, would destroy discrepancies rather than embrace them.

As in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Chinatown* posits the Asian as marginal in American society, but then utilizes the Asian as a central figure in its thematic pattern. Both films identify their white male protagonists with the "Other." John McCabe and Jake Gittes buck the system in their fight against the capitalistic aggression and greed of the Harrison-Shaughnessy mine company and Noah Cross, respectively. The "Other" has become "Us," all those who would resist prevailing norms and attitudes, only to be victimized by conformity or cancellation.

*The Deerhunter* (1977) is another film of the 1970s whose depiction of Asians proved significant to the political climate of the times. On the one hand, the film's detractors expressed concern that the film was reactionary in its affirmation of American small-town values when it should have been more politically astute in its approach to the Vietnam problem; they tended to view the film's presentation of the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese as racist in its depiction of them as bloodthirsty torturers and gamblers. On the other hand, the film's defenders argued that it was apolitical, a universal depiction of men at war and an honest portrayal of the American soldiers' mental, emotional, and physical debilitation.<sup>5</sup>

Cimino himself said that he was "just making a movie," in answer to criticism that he had distorted the war in Vietnam. Cimino may have been "just making a movie," but that movie reverberates with political ramifications. *The Deerhunter* is a good illustration of a mainstream film that reflects the dominant ideology yet criticizes it in certain ways. Like most films in the dominant cinema, it deflects from political issues by focusing on individual conflicts and their resolutions. It also avoids the Vietnam

question by choosing as its protagonists three young men from a small town in Pennsylvania who are untouched by the agitation against Vietnam. Yet another way in which the film serves the dominant ideology is the way it structures the conflicts along certain generic codes, namely, those of the western and the World War II combat film, in which the white westerner and American soldier are empowered as subjects and threatened by the other, the Indian, the Asian, or the German who plays a stereotypical role as the cruel aggressor. As such, the film incorporates the us and them, Americans vs. Others subtext fostered by these classic genres. In other words, it buys into the yellow peril image of Asians so long favored in the classical Hollywood cinema and in the fears within the American consciousness. As *The Deerhunter* empowers the American soldiers as subjects of the film's point of view and as victims of the war, it necessarily depicts the Viet Cong as cruel captors who gamble on the men's lives while subjecting them to a Russian roulette game. The Vietnamese fare no better in their portrait; they operate the same game, passionate in their bloodthirsty enjoyment of the sport.

On the other hand, *The Deerhunter* seems to subvert the dominant ideology in two ways. For one thing, the movie is an antiwar statement since it shows the crippling effects of war on the soldiers who fight it. And for another, the Russian roulette game played for money is metaphoric of a destructive capitalism. It implies that America is committing suicide in its foreign ventures as it uses its war machine to protect its own interests in southeast Asia.

The ideological ambiguity of *The Deerhunter* is nowhere more apparent than in the Russian roulette sequences. The empowerment of Mike (Robert De Niro), Nick (Christopher Walken), and Stevie (John Savage) by centering and subject positioning through mise-en-scène and editing is undercut, in part, by the enclosed space and arena, by the sense of their entrapment, produced also by mise-en-scène and editing. In other words, no matter what the men accomplish, whether they fail, escape, or merely survive, they are doomed pawns within the system of the American war machine and in the larger system of which it is part, the bourgeois ideology of self-interest. Let me illustrate this ambiguity by analyzing the filmic apparatus's production and subversion of Mike's and Nick's power as subjects in the final Russian roulette sequence in Saigon. Mise-en-scène, subject positioning, and editing work to produce an intense emotional identification with Mike and Nick in their confrontation. They are centered in

the screen frame and in the arena; the over-the-shoulder shots from each other's point of view and the shot reverse shots create a seam of significance between the two men and draw us into the drama of their conflict as Mike attempts to persuade Nick to give up the game and come home with him. The editing to extreme closeups of their faces, of the gun held up to their temples, and of Mike's hand on Nick's arm as Mike tries to stop Nick from taking his last turn, rivet our attention on their conflict and its inevitable outcome. In other words, the apparatus draws the audience into the individual conflict and its tragic resolution, as it has throughout the film in its deflection from the larger political issues.

However, the *mise-en-scène* suggests Mike's and Nick's entrapment in a situation they neither understand nor control. They are surrounded and enclosed by a frenzied crowd, combatants in a deadly game of profit and greed, subjecting themselves to suicide for the profit of others. We recall that Mike had to pay an extortion fee to get in at the entrance and that he had to buy into the game in order to play with Nick. The enclosed space of the *mise-en-scène* and the tight closeup shots between the crowd and combatants and between Mike and Nick inscribe another consciousness at work, one that runs counter to the subjective drama of the protagonists. The extreme closeups of Mike and Nick and the shot reverse shots between them may direct our attention to the limited space of their personal conflict, but they also function as commentary on the men's encapsulation by forces that have regulated them to this predicament. The individual drama of Mike and Nick, so much the focus of the film, is yet engulfed by the larger drama of imperialism and its victimization of its own and others in southeast Asia.

The critique of the dominant ideology in *The Deerhunter* represents more of an internal subversion than the critiques we find in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Chinatown*. The latter films consciously demythologize their genres and, along with that, the built-in structural and narrative codes that support the dominant ideology. Because of this, the two films' depiction of Asians differ significantly from *The Deerhunter's*. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Chinatown*, the filmic apparatus constructs Asians as victimized others in order to expose the skewed vision of the dominant white male perspective and the process by which the other is erased as an individual by the powers that be. In this way, Asians are used to underline the dominant ideology's distorted view towards others in its co-option of indi-

vidual differences. In *The Deerhunter*, Asians function as stereotypes along classic generic lines. They represent the enemy who threatens American heroes in war, raising the specter of the yellow peril and an Us vs. Them, Americans vs. Others conflict, so long the basis of a distorting view of Asians and Asian-Americans.

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## Notes and References

1. See Klinger (1988) for a discussion of the nature and characteristics of what she calls the "progressive genre" (especially pp. 77–84). Briefly, progressive films are those within the mainstream cinema that subvert the dominant ideology and its classical narrative system by an internal rupture of content or form. Klinger's essay takes as its basis the categories formulated by Comolli and Narboni in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (October 1969) to distinguish a film's ideological function, especially category "e." See Comolli and Narboni (1976, 22–30).

2. See Stam and Spence (1985) on racism as a rationale for power and oppression. For example, Stam and Spence quote Albert Memmi's definition of racism, which applies to any "-ism" in which difference plays a part in the establishment of power relations: "[racism is] the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser's benefit and at his victim's expense, in order to justify the former's own privilege or aggression" (Stam and Spence 1985, 635–636).

3. The Chinaman joke, which Jake Gittes hears from his barber, goes like this: This guy tells his friend that he's tired of screwing his wife. So his friend tells him, "Why don't you do what the Chinese do?" So he asks, "How do the Chinese do it?" The friend says, "Well the Chinese they screw a little bit, stop, go and read a little Confucius, come back, screw again; then they stop again, go back and screw a little bit more; makes it more exciting." So the guy goes home, and he screws his wife; then he stops and goes out and reads a magazine; then he comes back and screws a little bit more; stops and goes out and snacks a little. Now his wife is getting sore as hell. He comes back into the room, and he starts screwing again; and he gets up to start to go look at the moon; and she says, "Hey! What's the matter with you; you're screwin' just like a Chinaman!"

4. Wexman (1985) situates Gittes's racist-chauvinist attitude in the context of the hard-boiled detective's view of minorities and women as sources of corruption

within the genre (see especially pp. 97–98). Meanwhile, Martineau (1974, 24) offers a scathing response to the male characters' treatment of women in the film. Of Gittes's abuse of women, she writes: ". . . who demands that the woman trust him and his constructions whereas he cannot trust hers. The woman is always getting it in the ass as indicated by the blonde wife of Gittes' working class client – who is beaten by him and forced to cook and tend the children." And "While the male star gets a slit nose, the female star gets shot through the eye."

5. For examples of criticism that views *The Deerhunter* as reactionary, see Auster and Quart (1979), Kinder (1979), and Westerbeck (1979). For examples of those that view it as apolitical, see Kauffmann (1979), Kroll (1978), and Rich (1978).

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## Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism

BILL NICHOLS

**B**Y NOW UBIQUITOUS, international film festivals produce a global cohort of film viewers. No longer a peripheral phenomenon leading to the harsh realities of commercial distribution and exhibition situated elsewhere, festivals provide a continuous, international pattern of circulation and exchange for image-culture. They sustain a “traffic in cinema” that is fully part of a larger economy, aesthetics, and politics. I wish to examine some of the peculiarities of this traffic using the recent arrival of Iranian cinema within the film festival circuit as a specific referent.<sup>1</sup>

How do we as festival-goers engage with cinemas from elsewhere, with cinemas whose traditions are unknown and whose local mode of production/consumption lies beyond our purview? (The “we” is not necessarily white, or Western, since festivals occur around the globe, but my use of the term will refer to the festival cohort to which I belong: white, middle-class, Western festival-goers and commentators.)<sup>2</sup> The festival circuit allows the local to circulate globally, within a specific system of institutional assumptions, priorities, and constraints. Never only or purely local, festival films nonetheless circulate, in large part, with a cachet of locally inscribed difference and globally ascribed commonality. They both attest to the uniqueness of different cultures and specific filmmakers and affirm the underlying qualities of an “international cinema.”

We encounter such work as participant observers in a process that makes what would otherwise be unavailable available but in a form and context that simultaneously alter its local meanings and confer new, global ones. The festival context adds a global overlay to more local meanings. This trafficking can induce fresh insight and genuine respect or

appreciation, but it can also obscure or distort the culture it ostensibly reveals. In fact, a dialectic of comprehension/miscomprehension, understanding/misunderstanding, recognition/misrecognition prevails but not as (distorting) globalism to (authentic) localism. Rather, it is this dialectic itself and specific aspects of the interdependent, interpenetrating combination of localism and globalism that is misrecognized – particularly in those gestures that would lift the veil of international circulation to rediscover local origins. It is not local or national culture that will be the object of recovery or salvage here. Instead, the distinctive patterns of reception/interpretation fostered by the international film festival itself will provide an alternative focus.

Commentary in the *Toronto International Film Festival Catalogue* introducing a 1992 eighteen-film retrospective of postrevolutionary Iranian cinema encapsulates many of the tropes used to announce new national cinemas. We are urged to note how “a new breed of directors, such as Parviz Syyad, Kimiai-i, Dariush Mehrjui, and Amir Naderi, spring out of their national confines and impress cinephiles all over the world” (Eipides 1992, 277). In this moment, we witness the expansion of an international “cinema of quality,” which is counterbalanced by a simultaneous moment of local discovery:

Ebrahimifar’s directorial debut with the poetic masterpiece *Pomegranate and Cane*, Ayyari’s poignant social criticism in *Beyond the Fire*, Beizai’s beautifully exotic *Bashu* or Ms. Bani-Etemad’s powerful drama of contemporary life in *Nargess*, to mention only a few, give voice and vision to a culture that is vibrant, positive, and humanist, and portray a people who appear surprisingly familiar. (Eipides 1992, 277)

The local, here, displays the humanist coloration of a great family of man. This is an international film festival motif that becomes the central theme at the Hawaii International Film Festival, which has as its motto, “When Strangers Meet.” The by-product of cross-cultural understanding takes center stage here, so much so that instead of a best film award, Hawaii gives an annual East-West Center Award to the film that “best promotes understanding among the peoples of Asia, the Pacific and North America.” Difference yields to commonality, but Roland Barthes’s incisive critique of this homogenization of culture into one big (Western, nuclear) family is not entirely applicable (Barthes 1973, 100–102). Audiences may not be as thoroughly convinced of comforting similarities as Barthes sup-

posed. When presented in the types of thematic and regional arrays common to festivals, fictions – and documentaries – compel an acknowledgement of differences in aesthetic style, narrative structure, and social organization that the affinities adduced by a set of photographs (Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibit), differently arrayed, gloss over. The extraction of the familiar, and familiarly humanist, attempts to cover over fissures that are more inescapably present in films than photographs.

### THE AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF RECEPTION

How, then, can we receive these films from elsewhere and make sense of them? Deferring the question of the international film festival circuit’s place within a larger pattern of image-culture traffic for the moment, we might begin with the menu proposed by E. Ann Kaplan in a discussion of recent Chinese cinema. Kaplan argues that the greatest challenge is to “avoid defamiliarizing the alien text, appropriating or ‘managing’ it . . . or, worse still, ‘domesticating’ it into dominant Western critical paradigms. . . .” Nonetheless, we are forced into an either/or alternative: “to read works produced by the Other through the constraints of our own frameworks/theories/ideologies; or to adopt what we believe to be the position of the Other – to submerge our position in that of the imagined Other” (Kaplan 1991, 6). This either/or alternative, as experienced by the festival-goer, takes the form of a paradoxical injunction that requires the obliteration of either history or self, as Marianna Torgovnick makes clear in her discussion of primitive art:

Formal approaches to primitive objects as art imply a utopian end point in which the primitive and the modern or postmodern speak to each other in a timeless dialogue of line, form, vision, and design. Ethnographic approaches project a different utopian end point: the full and accurate re-creation of an Other’s point of view. But there is no psychic space that fully corresponds to the neutrality and purity desired by the formal approach. . . . There is also no guarantee that ethnographic knowledge can ever reproduce an Other’s viewpoint or that even the fullest ethnographic knowledge will fully overcome cultural conditioning or psychological imperatives. (Torgovnick 1990, 129–130)<sup>3</sup>

Kaplan opts for “reading” over “submergence,” arguing that since texts conceal their meanings, critics from elsewhere may uncover meanings not

found by critics from the same culture as the text, and goes on to propose two fundamental reading strategies: the aesthetic and the political. (These correspond to Torgovnick's formal and ethnographic, James Clifford's aesthetic and anthropological, discussed below, and my artistic and generic, also discussed below.) Aesthetic readings may be either "humanist/individual" or genre oriented. Political readings can emphasize economic, ideological, or institutional concerns (Kaplan 1991, 7). Kaplan herself chooses a combination of generic (melodrama) and political (historically and institutionally specific) reading, but the menu she proposes has general application.

The festival-goer's encounter with Iranian cinema appears to exhibit aspects of both an aesthetic reading (as these films are located within the framework of an international art cinema) and a political reading (as the same films are understood as windows onto key aspects of Iranian, or possibly Shiite Muslim, culture). I further suspect that viewers seek to experience a temporary submergence in the position of the imagined Other – during the act of viewing. If true, this makes further reflection on the dynamics of this particular experience itself worthwhile. I also want to depart from the argument that since texts conceal meanings, non-local critics can tease out meanings missed by local ones. My contention is that the entry of national cinemas and the work of individual filmmakers into the international film festival circuit itself constructs *new* meanings, and it is these new meanings that we, as festival-goers, are most likely to discover.

"Submergence" and "reading," as non-mutually exclusive alternatives, resonate with the colonial heritage of cross-cultural encounter. They seem to correspond, loosely, to ethnographic field work and cultural theory, or to the anthropology of artifacts and the aesthetics of art. "Submergence," passed over by Kaplan, reenacts (and perhaps pays guilt money for) the colonial encounter in which strangers meet within a force field of power. "Submergence" evokes the ethos of participatory ardor and redemptive humility advocated by Marcel Griaule, instigator of the famous Mission Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1932. (Submergence may present a Christian alternative, or companion, to a pagan ethos of conquest.)

"Reading" parallels the interpretive act that follows field work and participant-observation. It serves to yield theories about culture such as Lévi-Strauss's binary oppositions which underpin the exchange of signifiers (language) and of women (marriage). Reading operates in the realm of the

political (now reduced to the anthropological) or the aesthetic (now elevated to the timeless).

A look at the operation of these processes in the critical readings of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) "Primitivism" show by both Marianna Torgovnick and James Clifford may help clarify how international film festivals resemble but also clearly differ from this more reified and culturally sanctified form of encounter between strangers. In other words, I suspect that if museum shows like MOMA's represent a vestigial colonialism, as both Torgovnick and Clifford suggest, international film festivals may represent a nascent globalism no longer quite so squarely centered on Western aesthetics or the curatorial powers of the great collectors of the Western world.

### PRIMITIVISM/NEW CINEMAS

Primitive artifacts, tribal art, traditional culture – these concepts occupy a position within the world of anthropology and art similar to that occupied by new national cinemas and new international auteurs in the world of the international film festival. The former, however, is heavily object-based, centered on artifacts that migrate readily between cultural artifact and artistic treasure. Their status as physical objects facilitates this migration since it allows their straightforward treatment as commodities, with all the fetishistic attachments Marx anticipated. It is one small irony that modernism, which eschewed the contamination of mass culture and the marketplace so fervently, becomes effortlessly reinscribed within the marketplace of the museum and the art auction as a result of authenticity, the original and the masterpiece, dragging with it those examples of tribal art claimed to be its inspiration or aesthetic brethren.

Both Torgovnick and Clifford take issue with this aggrandizing process as seen in MOMA's "Primitivism" show.<sup>4</sup> Torgovnick identifies what we read into these predominantly African artifacts that gave inspiration to modernists like Léger, Appolinaire, Klee, Moore, and Picasso: taboo forms of violence, terror, and sexuality. Somehow, our sexual fantasies and violent nightmares get projected onto tribal art that then inspires the sublime achievements of high modernism.<sup>5</sup> (This would represent a peculiar form of "domestication" in which tribal art loses its strangeness by becoming an embodiment of our own repressed traumas.)

Torgovnick's corrective is a version of submergence: "to respect other

ways that art can be created, circulated, displayed, and received. . . . Western art historians need not supply any 'voice' for Africa; African voices can be heard if Westerners are willing to listen and willing to respect silences when silences greet questions" (Torgovnick 1990, 130, 136).

James Clifford also begins by noting the aggrandizing impulse in this "origin story" for modernist art. He stresses what it is we impose on artifacts from elsewhere: "affinities" and "influences" that frequently result from suggestive juxtapositions and mythic storytelling. (Affinity cannot be proven with a negative – the *lack* of realist or illusionist form in both cases, for example, although this is often the basis the MOMA show relies on; other affinities may result from common constraints – the basic shape of the human body, for example; still others may derive from the selection of similarity from a sample vast enough – almost all of tribal art – to guarantee *some* similarities despite equally significant differences [Clifford 1988, 191–196].) What we *impose* on tribal art becomes as crucial here as what we *project* on it was for Torgovnick.

Clifford's corrective steers away from submergence to stress a contestatory strategy of exhibition: "We need exhibitions that question the boundaries of art and of the art world, an influx of truly indigestible 'outside' artifacts" (Clifford 1988, 213).<sup>6</sup>

International film festivals may not escape the dilemmas of psychic projections and commodity aesthetics, but they do move outside the model of industrial capitalism with its locus of material objects that can double as signifiers of exchange value. The discovery of new national cinemas and their filmmaker artists operates much more fully inside the model of a postindustrial economy and postmodern condition devoted to the circulation of signifiers or images as such ("the society of the spectacle" in Debord's memorable phrase) rather than the physical artifacts valued by earlier stages of capitalism.

Cans of 35mm film have none of the intrinsic value that a Moore sculpture or a Dogon statue has. Value now resides in the dematerialized image or signifier as such and in the intellectual property rights attached to these phantoms on a screen. The postmodern, cinematic equivalent of the primitive – new cinemas, Third Cinema, undiscovered auteurs – have economic value strictly in relation to their (variable, relative, and constructed) position within a marketplace of signifiers, a system of virtual circulation, constituted by the film festival circuit and its art house, media

art center ancillaries in the first place. Questions of originality, authenticity, and influence diminish as issues of marketability and desirability rise. (What affinity audiences can be prompted to have *for* new cinema takes priority over questions of what affinity exists *between* their objects and our art. We enter the realm of a geopolitical imaginary spun from psychic mechanisms of voyeurism, fetishism, identification, paranoia, and obsession relatively unencumbered by the material artifacts that have traditionally supported this complex array of psychic investments.<sup>7</sup>)

The international film festival circuit does not tell origin stories, relying on a timeless zone of tribal culture or Third Cinemas as backdrop for the emergence of a modernist cinema in the West. If there is a backdrop to this story, it is more likely to be our own Hollywood cinema or classic narrative cinema against which independent Western cinema and all other cinemas differentiate themselves. And although this backdrop acknowledges a Western, Eurocentric center to the economy of film, the work of the film festival circuit lies in displacing this center, not bolstering it. As an instrument of hegemonic control, Hollywood occupies an oppositional position more than an inspirational one. (Iranian cinema, for example, and it is a fairly extreme example, has arisen with almost no direct contact with Hollywood film. Only a handful of Hollywood films enter Iran each year; for approximately fifty weeks per year Iranian film theaters exhibit Iranian cinema.<sup>8</sup>)

## FILM TRAFFIC

Earlier, I asserted that the international film festival circuit was no longer a peripheral phenomenon but an integral part of a larger pattern of circulation and exchange. This assertion derives from the circulatory pattern that James Clifford suggests for tribal artifacts. Using Greimas's semiotic rectangle in the spirit proposed by Fred Jameson, where it maps the limits of a given order of logic and thereby highlights its ideological underpinnings, Clifford sketches out the relationship shown in figure 1.

A corresponding rectangle can be proposed for global film traffic (see figure 2). Just as Clifford's rectangle allows artifacts to rise and fall, moving from one position to another, in a constant process of shifting interpretations and values, rising toward greater authenticity and moving leftward toward greater artistic distinction, or down toward inauthenticity and rightward toward greater typicality, this rectangle for the traffic in

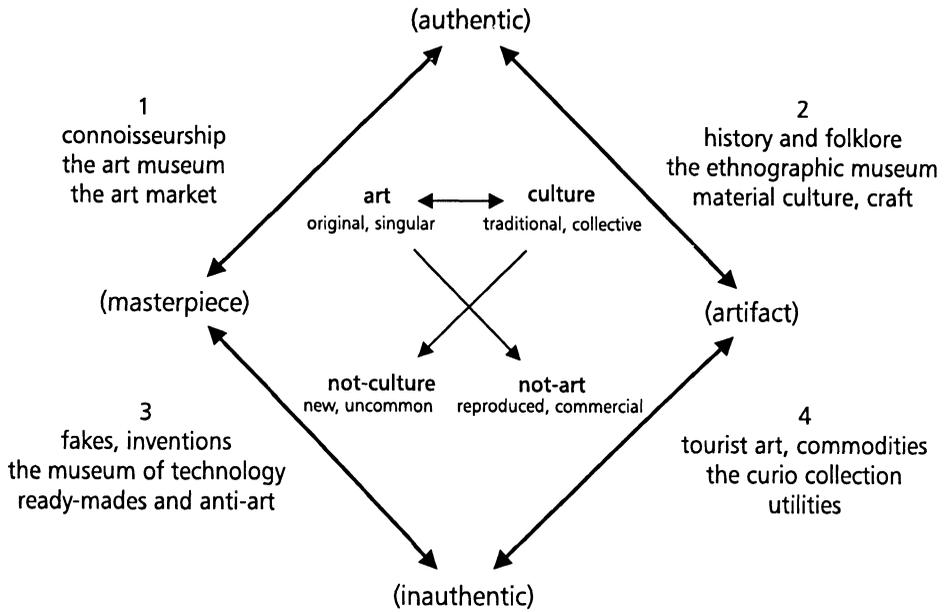


Figure 1. James Clifford's representation of the circulation of tribal artifacts from *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

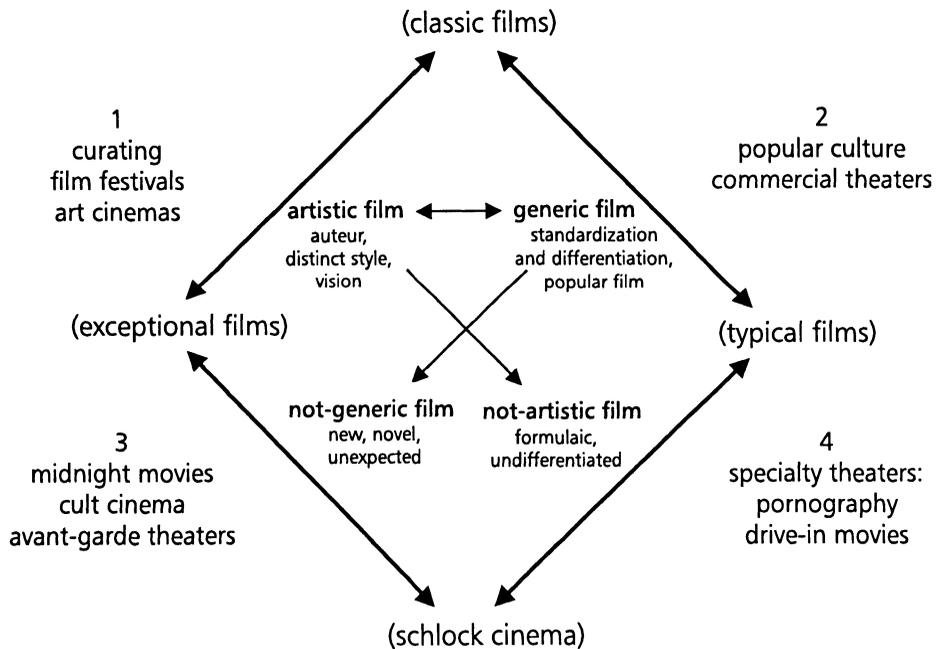


Figure 2. A representation of global film traffic using Greimas's semiotic rectangle.

film images allows films to rise toward the status of classics and move leftward toward the realm of the artistically exceptional, or to fall toward the disreputable and schlocky and rightward toward greater typicality (such as the typical Indian film as opposed to the distinctive work of Raj Kapoor or Satyajit Ray).

The rectangle's four zones are also permeable. Films destined for the zone of midnight movies, cult followings, and the avant-garde circuit may also move into the zone of the international film festival and art cinema circuit when levels of distinctiveness pass a certain plateau. (The Toronto festival, for example, has featured Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: Iron Man* (1989) and his *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1991) in its "Midnight Madness" series.) Festival films themselves will sometimes cross over into commercial release, as Jodie Foster's *Little Man Tate* and Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* did. Some theatrical films, over time, will rise to the level of classics while others will sink to the level of schlock. Nonartistic films such as formulaic works of pornography or horror may very well rise to the level of popular cinema within a sociological or, sometimes, aesthetic purview, or slide over into the more cult- and camp-oriented circuit of the nongeneric (as the techno porn cult favorite *Cafe Flesh* did some years ago).

What the semiotic rectangle suggested here establishes, in a rough, tentative way, is one particular logic and economy to the circulation of film. Films that cannot find a place within this logic must take up a place within an alternative logic or be reduced to the status of anomaly. (Political films with an avant-garde aesthetic often hover between the pole of the nongeneric but artistic and banishment from this particular economy altogether. Indigenous media work suffers a similar, perhaps even more acutely enforced, fate.) The economy has both its more distinctly national side (national cinema in terms of generic typifications) and international side (works that defy categories or differentiate themselves from the play of innovation and convention defined by genres and formulas). The oppositions and contraries and the zones they establish take on their identity in relation to each other. They are mutually dependent in both an economic and a semiotic sense.

Films, wherever produced, clearly belong to an industrial if not postindustrial mode of production. Though some may be made according to a naive or primitive aesthetic, they are far removed from the traffic in tribal art as such. (A film that weaves this very point into its thematic is *Kidlat*

Tahimik's *Turumba* [1983].) Though made locally, film production is always a site at which the global penetrates the local, the traditional, the national. (Local films need not, however, be made with an eye toward escape from this global net of capital, technology, and style: the global equivalents of *maquiladoras* exist where Hollywood products are made or assembled elsewhere expressly for entry into a multinational economy. These are rarely the films that enter into the international film festival circuit, passing instead directly into the zone of commercial release.)

Though made locally, within a regional or national context, film production almost always bears, far more than primitive art customarily does, a metonymic relation to the nation-state (which often serves as patron or financial backer, as it does in Iran) and a synecdochic relation to national culture. Even though Iranian cinema might be read in relation to Shiite culture and even though new Chinese cinema might be read in relation to Han culture, it is the nation-state (Iran, China) that provides the "natural" target for our allegorical readings. Promoting new work as representative samples and selective indications of the art of cinema in a given country, film festivals follow the common deflection of principles laid down by Marcel Mauss toward functionalist ends: by amassing a representative corpus of texts, one can understand the whole from its parts.<sup>9</sup> Both the parts and the whole, though, are constructs – imaginary identities and virtual cultures – not ontological givens.

The festival is designed to serve as a window through which audiences may be able to glimpse for the first time important aspects of this vital film culture. (Program note, *The Back of Beyond: Discovering Australian Film and Television*)

Like the museum, the international film festival takes on institutional and discursive powers of its own. These powers give museums and festivals a translucent quality: *through* them we glimpse those creative gestures and cultural achievements worthy of our attention; *in* them we witness the productive capacity of an apparatus to define meanings and subjectivities that did not exist heretofore. Adapting the aesthetics of illusionism, museums and festivals seek a transparency with what they represent, even though they also take pains to attest to their own powers as representational apparatuses. And if, as a comprehensive system, museums and festivals support both submergence and reading, both aesthetic and anthropological responses, both formal and ideological interpretations, it

suggests how these polarities of form/content, object/context, art/artifact, image/commodity serve as opposite sides of the same surface. They constitute a Möbius strip in which the choice of one entails the other. Operating in a lower, more festive key, without the pomp of ceremony, the burden of authentication, or the disciplinary rigor of anthropological/art historical interpretation, the translucency of international film festivals prepares for the coming to knowledge of patrons in distinctive ways.

### COMING TO KNOWLEDGE IN THE REALM OF THE FILM FESTIVAL

Another way to describe the production of new meanings rather than the discovering of concealed ones is to assert that the production of recent Iranian cinema, there, corresponds to the production of festival patrons, here. Here, too, we find a staging reminiscent of the anthropological tradition from which film festivals both borrow and depart. The tone of respect and humility ascribed to the work of Marcel Griaule is not very different from the tone promoted by most film festivals: "Characteristic of the Griaule School was an intellectual respect for African knowledge and a willing, if sometimes staged, humility to learn from [the local elders]" (Apter 1992, 93). Staged, in part, because of a less humble, more assertive desire for "back region" knowledge, for that form of knowing that will propel us past the ostensible "fronts" erected to screen private, secret, intimate, or sacred behavior.<sup>10</sup> The traffic in tourism has fostered a complex, choreographic pageantry devoted to the production of the experience of the "back region" knowledge that Griaule had to win for himself more singlehandedly.

The sizable cluster of recent Iranian films gathered together at the Toronto Festival of Festivals in September 1992 puts these processes in play. A festival viewer, reading the program material, may well enter this encounter in a spirit quite akin to Griaule's. And, as submergence in this new, unfamiliar world oscillates with readings of it, the viewer will seek out similarities and differences with other national cinemas and with the existing repertoire of films that constitute an evolving, international film form. In this case, differences are quite apparent: acts of public violence and of domestic intimacy, xenophobia and xenophilia, social causes of degradation and hardship, existential alienation and subjective interiority all seem remarkably muted if not entirely absent. For some, this marks a point of departure. Within the first thirty minutes, a small but noticeable

contingent of patrons makes its way to the exits. Most remain, moving on to the next stage in coming to knowledge: an attempt to fathom some of the organizing principles to this distinct set of texts (the level of genre in Kaplan's menu).

At the level of auto-ethnography, I saw twelve of the eighteen films included in the Toronto retrospective. Gradually, certain similarities began to arise against the ground of this unfamiliar cinema. One example will perhaps suffice.<sup>11</sup> In the midst of taking cognizance of a recurrent motif, sacrifice, another principle became apparent. *Where Is the Friend's Home*, *Life and Nothing But*, *Stony Lion*, and *The Need* all conclude with a gesture of significant but unobtrusive sacrifice. This is most vivid in *The Need*, where the hero, Ali, discovers that Reza, his rival for the one available job, has a bedridden father who cannot work. We do not know what his thought process is, but in the next, concluding scene Ali is no longer in the print shop. Instead we see him in another small shop, producing what look like touristic artifacts. We are left to draw our own conclusions as we watch the young man silently working, the only figure in the frame.

The transition from Ali's visit to Reza's home, where he discovers Reza's infirm father, to the workshop, where he now works at film's end, provides an indirectness that seems typical of Iranian cinema. It suggests a form of narrative structure that could be called inferential. Rather than building "hooks" and bridges with dialogue or sound, rather than suggesting the linear movement from cause to effect, and rather than evoking overtone or associative connections, inferential storytelling moves from one situation to a *later* consequence, or it describes a complex situation without steering us toward an unmistakable meaning. It sidesteps causality with indirection. Inferential storytelling, in keeping with the observational camera style, nonexpressive use of sound and image, and laconic dialogue, prompts us to fill in, to infer and draw conclusions for ourselves. A sense of logic internal to the events we see and to the characters we follow prevails, but its causal chain is not presented so much as the consequential actions that allow us to infer such a chain in the first place.

Along with *The Need*, *The Runner* offers many examples where inferential reading becomes called for such as the parallel between the worn-out light bulbs Amori uses to decorate the abandoned hulk of a ship where he lives and the strings of bright, multicolored lights that surround the outdoor cafe where he shines shoes and earns money for his dreams of escape. Editing establishes the parallel, but the inferences to be drawn are

left to the viewer. In another scene, a shark drives the boys from the shallow harbor water where they wade, collecting empty bottles. Several scenes later, Amori, who clearly prides himself on his ability to run, sees a boy with one leg. His extended gaze at the boy leaves the viewer to infer, retrospectively, how intense a danger the shark had posed to Amori.

One of the most impressive uses of inferential editing involves virtually no editing at all. It is more properly a long-take version of the same principle. This is the final scene of *Life and Nothing But*. In this scene, the father is told by two boys to whom he offers a ride that he must drive up an extremely steep hill if he is to reach his destination, Quoker. (This is the town where the two boys who starred in *Where Is the Friend's House?* live. The father, surrogate for Kiarostami, director of both these films, wants to find the boys in the wake of a devastating earthquake throughout the region.) Leaving the two other boys off, the father continues his journey, passing a man carrying a heavy gas cylinder on the way. When he reaches the steep hill the camera retreats to a long shot, showing the car and the hill together. It never moves from this distant position. The father tries gunning his engine and dashing up the hill but fails. He must return and start again. On his next attempt, the man with the cylinder has reached this part of the road. He helps him position the car. The father tries again, successfully, and passes the man with the cylinder for a second time. Then, after getting beyond the steepest part, he pauses, waits, and gives the man a ride. He continues, still seen in long shot, as the film concludes.

It remains for the audience to infer the significance of this scene. No dialogue or psychological editing (facial close-ups, point of shots, clear impressions of hesitation, doubt, or insight) offer guidance. Within the framework of inferential storytelling, and reading, characters become means to an end, valued less in their own right for the interior processes by which they arrive at a given course of action than for the outward manifestations of inner processes whose larger significance we must infer.

This type of reading occurs several times over as yet other qualities appear to emerge from the films. The festival format encourages a sense of deference or humility, curiosity, and receptivity that is then rewarded by the "discovery" of a system, a set of encoded meanings rendered intelligible. The accretion of details, the cross-referencing of people (actors),

places, and things, similarities of themes, commonalities of structure, pre-occupation, rhythm, emphasis, and omission contribute to the gradual layering of texts with new meanings that sparkle across their surfaces. The festival audience exudes murmurings of insight and a chorus of agreement that yes, recent Iranian cinema does deserve induction into the festival circuit of international film.

### PROSETHIC AURA

Primitive artifacts in a sense lost their authenticity as soon as the West got access to them.

MARIANNA TORGOVNICK, *Gone Primitive*

The humble but exuberant festival, our genie in the lamp, brings the new and wondrous constantly before us. It does so without necessarily advancing U.S., Japanese, or European hegemony, Hollywood standards, or a globalized but predominantly American pop culture. This is reason enough to pay tribute to its seldom-acknowledged place with the global image economy. The liveliness of discussion characterizing the coming to knowledge in the midst of the world's great film festivals is similar to what I would like to imagine fifth-century Athens was like at the level of the tone and intensity of everyday speech.

If there is a return of aura, in the sense meant by Walter Benjamin, in this, it is a prosthetic (fabricated, serviceable) aura that marks the festival itself rather than the procession of mechanically reproduced images it presents (Benjamin 1969). Like the museum but in a more diffuse, carnivalesque spirit of potential subversion, the festival site now simulates the aura of authenticity and tradition that the unique work previously had attached to itself. It marks the place of meaning as religious icons once did and as public spectacles now do in a more free-floating manner. This semiotic freedom reminds us that prosthetic aura is made, not found. Complicit with the construction of imaginary nation-states, international film festivals are simultaneously an arena where other imagined communities can arise, articulate themselves, coalesce, and contend.

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## Notes and References

1. This article is only possible thanks to the generous assistance of staff at the Toronto International Festival of Festivals, where I saw a significant sample of recent Iranian cinema. Dimitri Eipides, programmer for the Iranian cinema retrospective, and Susan Norget, press officer, were extremely helpful arranging interviews. An earlier, quite different, version of this article was delivered as a paper at the East-West Center conference on globalism in December 1992. My thanks to conference participants for suggestions and comments. My colleague at UC Santa Cruz, Catherine Soussloff, also offered many constructive comments on an earlier draft for which I am most grateful.

2. The international film festival audience would be one, relatively minor, extension of the group dynamics disparaged by Jameson (1991). Speaking of unnamed but more politically motivated formations or “new social movements,” Jameson argues that these groups arise from the rubble of now-vanished social classes. He goes on, “Pluralism is thus the ideology of groups, a set of phantasmic representations that triangulate three fundamental pseudoconcepts: democracy, the media, and the market” (p. 320). Group identity and group politics, outside the framework of class conflict, become a compensation formation for a situation where totalizing politics are not perceived to be possible (p. 330). Festival audiences are hardly the group with which to begin a counter-argument, but I would want to justify the consideration given to such a group here as part of a phenomenology of precisely those forms of identity, of recognition and misrecognition, that may be “only” mystifications and compensatory mechanisms, on the one hand, but that also take on a palpable, experiential reality of their own. Like the shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave, these groups may owe their existence to the productive social mechanisms that elude empirical analysis, but they nonetheless have an existential reality that is part of the social totality to which we must ultimately attend.

3. Torgovnick here equates ethnography with submergence when this should more properly be understood as one aspect of a larger anthropological project that also includes “reading” practices.

4. I have chosen not to place primitivism in quotation marks unless it refers to the Museum of Modern Art “Primitivism” show directly. This would be a convenient way to indicate a certain critical distance from the common use of the word, but it is too comfortable and self-serving a gesture. All the words available to indicate the work and artifacts of cultures different from our own – tribal, primitive, savage, native, traditional, and so forth – are terms coined in the West with meanings that depend on the always already present opposition of them/us. None of these terms, with quotation marks or not, corresponds adequately to the

vocabulary or perspective of those to whom they are applied. Since I am examining our rituals of cross-cultural encounter, words like *tribal* and *primitive* at least have the advantage of being the exact words used, not further euphemisms or displacements of the “othering” for which we remain responsible.

5. “What we see in ‘tribal’ art . . . suggests, though it may not intend to do so, the encoding of taboo unconscious urges, the violence and sexuality repressed by the Victorians but projected onto the primitive by moderns like Leiris” (Torgovnick 1990, 124). The repression/projection model, seemingly operative in the colonial tradition leading up to this show, may be a clumsy first approximation. How this model takes on added complexity in relation to the proliferation of discourses about sexuality described by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* would require a separate essay. The collection, description, and celebration of primitive art may itself be one such discourse.

6. One wonders if the indigestible quality Clifford seeks is aimed at curators or customers. If the latter, we may too readily drift toward nausea and a rejection of the primitive on grounds quite similar to those produced by projected taboos of sex and violence. If the former, it may produce a chastened group of curators, no longer confident of the categories and values they deploy, but also no more capable than now of mediating cultural difference. Clifford’s attention to the issues of how we display tribal art instead of how we hear what tribal artists have to say favored by Torgovnick may also leave too fully intact the underlying nexus of market relations and commodity exchange. Without shifting the reception of tribal art away from the aura cast by our standards of high art, originality, authenticity, and creative spirit as mediated by the general equivalent of exchange, money as a measure of market value, the indigestibility of artifacts may, in any case, be quite partial at best.

7. Jameson (1992) pursues this point in depth. His emphasis, however, is on deeper structures of figuration such as paranoia and on the complex overlap between the global and the local that sees the local always and only in relation to a totalizing project. Valuable though this approach is, I wish here to give more attention to the specific forms and local manifestations through which we come into contact with this geopolitical aesthetic, mainly through an extended discussion of the international film festival and its own mediating if not determining contribution to such an aesthetic.

8. Interview with Mohammad Atebbai, Farabi Cinema Foundation, Toronto, Sept. 19, 1992.

9. See Clifford (1988), especially chapter 2, “Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule’s Initiation.” Clifford comments, “Thus Mauss’s belief that the totality of society is implicit in its parts or organizing structures may appear as a kind of enabling charter for a broad range of fieldwork tactics (approaches to social representation in the rhetorical mode of synecdoche), without which rela-

tively short-term professional fieldwork would be questionable – particularly research aiming at portrayals of whole cultures” (p. 64).

10. See MacCannell (1976) for a complete discussion of back regions in relation to the tourist experience. Crick (1985) has described the parallels between anthropologists and tourists.

11. A more comprehensive discussion of the formal qualities of recent Iranian cinema occurs in my “Recent Iranian Cinema and the Film Festival Circuit,” *Film Quarterly*, forthcoming.

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# Representations of Micronesia on Film, Video, and Television

JAMES MELLON

In some respects his films are as much about him  
– his pleasures, his prejudices, his convictions –  
as about the people he was filming.

JACK C. ELLIS, on Robert Flaherty

ROBERT FLAHERTY, sometimes referred to as the founder of documentary film, made *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* in 1926. After his success with *Nanook of the North*, which depicted life among Eskimos in Canada, Flaherty headed south into the Pacific to record images of tropical island life in Samoa. John Grierson, leader of the British documentary movement in the 1930s, wrote in a review of *Moana* in the *New York Sun*: “Of course, *Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value” (Ellis 1989, 4). *Moana* thus became the first film to which the term documentary was applied. Though not nearly as successful as *Nanook*, *Moana* encouraged filmmakers to create films about exotic, other worlds that would appeal to the American audience’s growing interest in popular anthropology (Barnouw 1983, 48).

It is interesting that while one of the most influential films that established the documentary tradition in North America had as its subject life on a Pacific island, no analysis of films about the islands has been published.<sup>1</sup> Even the subject of Pacific Islanders as portrayed in feature films has been overlooked, despite the substantial literature that examines representations of other ethnic groups. As film theory and criticism has become an established academic discipline, and as historians and other social scientists have increasingly recognized the value of using film as

source material, the possibilities for examining diverse and exciting aspects of films of and about the Pacific Islands seem limitless.

In this paper I focus on one area of the Pacific, the cultural and geographic area known as Micronesia, concentrating on images of the people and their lives as represented in documentaries. First I survey the documentary films and videos about Micronesia. Then I examine the content of these audio-visual texts, identifying themes and the way they are treated by the filmmakers. As discussion of the more than seventy-five documentary films and videos related to this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, the primary focus will be on those about American influence and involvement in Micronesia since World War II.<sup>2</sup>

The framework for this analysis lies within one of the current major issues in Pacific Islands historiography. Pacific historians have been encouraged to reassess the interpretations and discourses associated with the fatal impact idea that have commonly informed commentary on the Pacific.<sup>3</sup> At the root of this trend is a deemphasis on the weight of Euro-American domination and an affirmation of the role that Pacific Islanders played in responding to outside influences and in shaping their own lives. J. W. Davidson's work marks the beginning of this trend, some forty years ago, when "the emphasis from now on was on the islander and the islands as seen from the islands rather than as formerly on the machinations of great power politics" (Maude 1971, 4). This "islander-oriented" history attempts to discover and give significance to the Islander's role in history rather than assume the colonizer's role is really the only important stuff of which history is made. History in the Pacific has usually stressed contact between indigenous peoples and foreigners, interpreting contact as one in which outside influence and domination have had a severely debilitating impact on indigenous peoples, whose fragile institutions and cultural systems were unable to withstand or adapt to outside influence. Conjunction, a two-way encounter across islands and beaches, rather than disjunction, is a guiding principle of one of the new waves in Pacific history.

But this paradigm raises a difficult question: How does a writer – or oral historian or filmmaker – tell a story about colonial transactions that adequately acknowledges both islander agency and colonial domination? If islander agency is stressed too heavily, a narrative might be flawed for diminishing the negative impact of colonialism or suggesting islanders' complicity in the colonial arrangement (though certainly this may be a

valid point in some instances). On the other hand, “island-oriented” history tends not to recognize the ways particular cultures, individuals, and local conditions interact with and respond to an imperial or colonial presence. As Nicholas Thomas has commented in an article on representation, colonialism, and agency:

A more integrated discussion of the processes of pre-contact, colonial, and post-colonial history would not abandon the orientation toward islands, toward local events and representations, but would have to overcome the tendency to make of *either* culture and agency *or* politics and dominance a sufficient and independent frame of analysis. (Thomas 1990, 140)

The films and videos about Micronesia ultimately reveal more about their makers and their worlds than about the worlds of Micronesia. For many people outside the Pacific Islands – for whom most of these documentaries are primarily intended – images created on film or video are the only ways they may come to know what has traditionally been portrayed in the West as a paradise, a world of perfect balance and harmony. This analysis is a critical lens through which to view these projected images.

#### SURVEY OF FILMS AND VIDEOS ABOUT MICRONESIA

The earliest known footage of Micronesia on film was shot by a German crew in 1910 when the “South Sea” was still under German control. This short (12-minute) film, called *Voelkenkunliche Film Dokumente Aus Der Sudsee*, documents dances of the Caroline Islands, particularly Chuuk (in addition to some from the Bismarck Archipelago off the coast of New Guinea), and shows islanders performing various skills such as weaving and pottery-making and firemaking.

Not until World War II did images of Micronesia again appear. Apparently any films shot during the Japanese period have been destroyed or are unavailable outside Japan. As some of the bloodiest and most decisive battles were fought on Micronesian islands, the activity in this theater is reflected to some extent in both documentary and feature films. The U.S. Navy produced a short film (20 minutes) documenting the invasion of the Palau Islands in 1944 (*Fury in the Pacific*) and another in the same year describing the assault on Saipan by the U.S. military (*The Battle for the Marianas*). More footage on Saipan is found in *Payoff in the Pacific*, a 1960 U.S. Army film.

Various other films and videos contain documentary footage of war-time Micronesia. The documentary series *Victory at Sea* (circa 1945), produced by NBC-TV, contains two thirty-minute segments on Micronesia, one on the Gilbert and Marshall Islands and one on the Marianas. *Guam: The Legacy of War*, a 1984 video, uses Japanese and American involvement in the war as a point of departure to discuss contemporary land-rights issues on Guam. Several other documentaries deal to a lesser extent with Micronesia within the broader context of the war.<sup>4</sup> Hollywood also produced numerous feature films about World War II in the Pacific, a popular subject with American audiences. *Hell in the Pacific* (1969), starring Lee Marvin as an American pilot and Toshiro Mifune as a Japanese naval officer who stalk each other on a deserted Pacific island, is unique in that it was filmed in Palau in the late 1960s.

Complementing the U.S. program of ethnographic research commencing after the war, two now-classic films were made depicting the social life and customs of atoll dwellers in Micronesia. *The Polynesians of Kapingamarangi* was the result of two trips led by Kenneth Emory to the Polynesian outlier Kapingamarangi, now part of Pohnpei state. In 1947 Emory traveled with a film crew to the atoll to record "the last vestiges of traditional Polynesian culture" (Miller 1989, 134). Stressing cooperation and community life among the islanders, the film centers on the main activities of everyday life on the atoll: fishing, gardening, canoe making, house building, food preparation, and recreation. Emory returned in 1950 for more footage, culminating in the first edition of the film being produced by the Bishop Museum in that year.

Around the same time, *Mokil* (1948) was produced. Much like the film on Kapingamarangi, *Mokil* depicts major aspects of life on the atoll but differs in that the film addresses the issues of change brought on by a typhoon that occurred before European contact. Population pressure and the ecology of an atoll are major themes stressed in the film. Rather than portraying the inhabitants of Mwoakilloa (formerly Mokil) as forever living in an ethnographic present, the filmmakers attempt to show the dynamic nature of the islanders' world. Along with these films about atolls, Indiana University produced a short film in 1949 about the daily activities of the people of Likiep atoll in the Marshalls (*Pacific Island*).

In addition to *The Polynesians of Kapingamarangi* and *Pacific Island*, a handful of other primarily ethnographic films and videos has been produced since the late 1940s. The most extensive footage is contained in

*Lamotrek Atoll*, a “research film” spanning more than three hours. Made in 1983 as part of the Micronesian Transition Series, the film describes the magic, arts, folklore, and other activities of the people of this atoll located between Chuuk and Yap. A shorter video on Lamotrek (*Lamotrek: Heritage of an Island*, 1988) and a third video on other nearby outer islands of Yap (*The Precarious Balance*, 1976) focus on the relationship between island skills and the spirit world of indigenous mythology. Like *Mokil*, however, changes brought about by outside influences and their effect on indigenous systems of belief are discussed to some extent. In addition, several other films and videos present Micronesian culture through art and dance.<sup>5</sup>

Indigenous systems of navigation are the primary focus of three more recent videos. *The Navigators: Pathfinders of the Pacific* (1983) weaves the story of traditional navigation as practiced today on Satawal into a larger pan-Pacific context about the origins and migration of the first Pacific island settlers. *The Last Navigator* (1989) follows a canoe journey from Satawal to Saipan in which an American (Stephen Thomas, author of the book by the same title) joins Mau Pailug and other Satawalese navigators to learn traditional navigational skills. *Kupe* (1992) also features Pailug as he assists in the making and voyaging of a traditional Maori sailing vessel from New Zealand to Rarotonga. *Satawalese Canoe Departure from Saipan, Spring 1988, and Traditional Dance* (1988) focuses on a canoe navigated by Pailug, now somewhat of a cult hero outside of Micronesia.<sup>6</sup>

*Kamadipw* (1983) was explicitly made to document the “traditional” customs surrounding Pohnpeiian feasting. One of the filmmakers claims the people of Pohnpei were eager to have a record of the “old ways,”<sup>7</sup> though the results of their intentions are problematic. The filmmakers, rather than simply filming a naturally occurring feast in which “traditional” customs are clearly at work in contemporary Pohnpei life, chose to film recreations of the past performed by people of Pohnpei in the present. The viewer hears an islander giving directions to others at a feast, instructing them in or reminding them of the correct “traditional” ways.

A final primarily ethnographic film about Micronesia is *Atoll Life in Kiribati* (1983). Part of the Human Face of the Pacific Series produced by Film Australia, this hour-long video describes the way of life of ordinary people of Kiribati and stresses the continuation of various traditions. A similar video, *Kiribati* (1989), also documents contemporary life in that

atoll nation, stressing that though “changes are taking place,” time is “moving at a slow pace.” Kiribati is also represented on film in *Kiribati? Here We Are* (1979), recording important historical events in the Gilberts leading up to its emergence as the independent state of Kiribati, and *Kiribati Aid Series* (1982), a three-part instructional video series designed to explain to the people of Kiribati the advantages of a sewerage system installed by the Australian government. *Go Tell it to the Judge*, written and narrated by James Cameron in the mid-1970s, tells the story of the Banabans’ struggles with the British Phosphate Company and their resettlement to Rabi, Fiji. A short film on Nauru (simply titled *Nauru*), the only one of its kind, was distributed by Film Australia in 1962. This pre-independence paternalistic film describes life on the island “where Australia is preparing the people for life in the modern world” (Miller 1989, 112).

Micronesia has been the setting for a few documentaries concerned with science and the environment. The BBC-produced *Secrets of the Coral Islands* (1976) describes the island ecology of Belau while raising issues surrounding development and modernization and their potential for destroying Belau’s reefs and marine life. Coral life and marine beds also come into focus in *Truk’s Legendary Lagoon* (circa 1989). This video takes an underwater look at Japanese ships sunk in the lagoon during World War II and how the marine environment has been affected by their presence. Parts of *Aliens from Inner Space* (1984), a film describing recent studies on visual language and color, were filmed in the coral atolls of Micronesia.

In the late 1960s the Marianas District Education Department of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), under a grant from the U.S. Office of Education, produced a series of films on Micronesia (the Micronesia Series), one each on the six districts of the TTPI (Marianas, Palau, Yap, Truk, Ponape, and the Marshalls).<sup>8</sup> Each about fifteen minutes in length, the films were made to be used as social studies material for fifth-grade classrooms (Miller 1989, 98). They aimed to increase students’ awareness of selected aspects of life on the other islands in the territory, ostensibly to create and reinforce a sense of unity among these islanders. These films are unique in that they were produced by an arm of the TTPI government, thus providing valuable material to be compared with films and videos produced independently. Also at this time two short films produced by CCM Films Inc. called *Micronesia: Our Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands* (1969) and *Guam-USA* (1969) appeared, basically cultural and geographic studies covering the origins, early history, and contempo-

rary life of Micronesians. A few years later in 1973, a similar film simply called *Micronesia* was produced by MacMillan Films.

*Liberation 40* traces the history of Guam and the Chamorro people in four parts: prewar Guam, invasion and occupation by the Japanese, and liberation by the Americans. This detailed and informative documentary blends interviews, oral histories, archival film footage, and still photographs to present the richest historical audio-visual material available about this often overlooked Micronesian island.

The 1970s in the Pacific are sometimes referred to as the “Decade of Decolonization.” As revealed on film, this ten-year span in Micronesian history might be termed the “Decade of Disillusionment.” Social change as a direct result of American policy and influence is the dominant theme in these films and videos. This theme parallels much of the analysis and sentiment that appeared in written texts at the time.<sup>9</sup> Writing in the 1970s, these authors were able to present interpretations of political, social, and economic developments in the TPI which spanned a thirty-year period. This wave of accounts seriously criticized American notions of political, social, economic, and educational “advancement” and the ways in which they were or were not being carried out in Micronesia and underscored the United States’ fundamental interest in and concern with the strategic importance of these islands. The bottom line was that rather than fulfilling the obligations as mandated in the United Nations Trusteeship Agreement, the United States was acting according to its own self-interest and promoted massive economic dependence in the islands.

Furthermore, this period marks the first time we are presented with films or videos produced almost entirely by Micronesians themselves. Many of the videos produced during the late 1970s were part of a series called the Micronesian Transitions Series.<sup>10</sup> Students at Xavier High School in Chuuk, through their classes in media and an annual senior project involving the analysis of current social issues, produced videos examining the subjects of alcohol use and abuse, employment and unemployment, consumption of imported food through the USDA Needy Family Food Program, youth problems, modernization, and the media. One video also traces early foreign contacts in the islands and attempts to interpret the long-lasting effects of such contact. *With the First Canoe*, coproduced by Maria Yatar of Guam, looks at the history and rebirth of the art of tattooing and its effects of cultural revitalization and renewal of self-identity for some Micronesians.

In 1974 New York public television pursued the subject of the American administration of the TTPI. *That Uncertain Paradise* explores the effects of colonialism on traditional customs and values of Micronesia. The documentary focuses on the changes imposed by the American presence in the islands. Though never a part of the TTPI, Guam and the prevalence of drug abuse on the island is the topic of Dan Baker's *Doing It* (1978). Probably the best-known maker of documentary films about the Pacific, Dennis O'Rourke traveled to Yap in the early 1980s to record the introduction of television to the island and make statements about its potentially detrimental effect on Yapese society (*Yap: How Did You Know We'd Like TV?*, 1982). O'Rourke also co-produced *Pacific Paradise?* (1988), a video that explores the varying effects of European and American colonialism in Kiribati, Tahiti, and Bikini. American defense policy in the Pacific is the subject of a 1985 BBC production called *Echoes of War*. The narrative begins in South Korea and travels east across the Pacific, discussing Micronesia along the way to Hawai'i.

The Republics of Palau and the Marshalls have received considerable attention on film and video because of the unique situations each has encountered under American administration. At least five videos and several American television newsmagazine shows present images of Palau. All deal to some extent with Palau's nuclear-free constitution, an issue most prominently covered in *Strategic Trust: The Making of a Nuclear Free Palau* (1984). The ways in which the United States has responded to assertions of a nuclear-free Palau and the seemingly endless series of plebiscites on the Compact of Free Association that have taken place there since the first in 1983 are documented in *Palau Plebiscite '86: A Video Testimony* (1987), *Doing it Right: Democracy in the Pacific* (1988), and a segment called "Trouble in Paradise" shown on the public television newsmagazine "Frontline" in 1988. ABC-TV's "20/20" also broadcast a segment on Palau in July 1987 focusing mainly on the controversy over the IPSECO power plant. Additionally, a group of Palauans produced a video in both Palauan and English that raised critical political questions to educate voters for the December 1986 plebiscite (*Ne Uchetemel a Llach Ma Lechub Eng Compact: Ngevar Ngii A Mo Melekau Ra Delad El Belau?*, 1986).

The Marshall Islands are by far the most represented area of Micronesia on film and video. The U.S. nuclear testing program there may have escaped significant international attention during its execution in the

1940s and 1950s, but the sheer number of films and videos detailing the tragic history of many Marshall Islanders produced since then makes it one aspect of American involvement in the Pacific that is difficult to ignore. Perhaps best-known among them is Dennis O'Rourke's *Half Life: A Parable for the Nuclear Age* (1986); others include *The Marshall Islands: Living with the Bomb* (part of the 1983 Human Face of the Pacific series), *Nuclear Exodus* (1986), *Nuclear Exiles* (1987), *The Marshall Islands: A Matter of Trust* (1988), and *Radio Bikini* (1988), a PBC production nominated for an Academy Award. Most recently, ABC-TV broadcast nationally a program called *Bikini: Forbidden Paradise*, a documentary exploring Bikini atoll and its people, who were displaced when their home became the first peacetime testing site of an atomic bomb in 1946. *South Pacific: End of Eden?* (1978), narrated by James Michener, includes a discussion of the effects of the hydrogen bomb on Enewetak.

Several films produced by the U.S. government add invaluable documentation to the nuclear testing program and its consequences: the Navy's *Operation Crossroads* (1949), the Air Force's *The Air Force Story: The Air Force and the Atom Bomb* (1960), and the Department of Nuclear Administration's *Enewetak: A Radiological Cleanup* (1981). These issues are also taken up to some extent in several more general films about a nuclear-free Pacific.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, a recent documentary titled *Home on the Range* (1989) details a Marshallese chief's attempts to stop the use of Kwajalein atoll as an American weapons testing site by the U.S. military.

The Alele Museum in the Marshalls, the Federated States of Micronesia Political Affairs Office, and the Palau Community Action Agency have been producing videos in recent years (Karen Peacock, personal communication, March 1991). These videos are intended to document important events and occasions and record traditional skills. At least one video travelogue intended to promote tourism has been produced. In the future it is likely that more of this type of video will be produced by both private businesses and the government in Micronesia as the promotion of tourism increases in the islands. The Catholic Mission in Chuuk has also sponsored the production of a series of videos focusing on contemporary social issues. They are intended for local audiences and are produced by Micronesians.

The filmography at the end of this paper lists the films and videos about Micronesia.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

*Culture and Change*

Culture change is a dominant theme in the study of the Pacific Islands. One common discourse laments the loss of traditions and the adoption or incorporation of Western values and institutions. This view assumes that change is inherently destructive, that the old is good and the new bad, that the past was free of conflict and problems that are an inescapable feature of the present. Yet a more complex approach to culture and tradition holds that these processes are dynamic, in a state of constant flux, constructed and reconstructed by people throughout history. The present task of describing culture, write Marcus and Fischer, is

to revise ethnographic description away from [a] self-contained, homogeneous, and largely ahistorical framing of the cultural unit toward a view of cultural situations as *always* in flux, in a perpetual historically sensitive state of resistance and accommodation to broader processes of influence that are as much inside as outside the local context. (Marcus and Fisher 1986, 78)

How are ideas of culture and culture change presented in films about Micronesia? The only ethnographic film which does not deal to any extent with change is *The Polynesians of Kapingamarangi*. The people and their ways of living in this film are depicted as though they exist in a timeless state; they are placed in a geographic but not a historical context. When discussions of change do occur in the films and videos, they tend to demarcate history into pre- and post-European contact periods. The pre-contact period is presented as a time of stability and harmony in island paradises, with the postcolonial and contact period depicted as a time of intrusion and confusion. The films and videos portray the historical "untouched" islands as paradise and the contemporary islands as tainted, fatally impacted. The complexity of the islands' pasts are ignored. More contemporary issues are thus made to seem even more problematic in light of a mythical, romanticized past.

As Vincente Diaz (1992) has pointed out with regard to Chamorro history, a discourse of cultural encounters that competes with that of the fatal impact can also be identified: situating Western contact in the context of romance, progress, civilization, and development. Post-European

contact periods are thus viewed as positively progressing toward enlightenment and advancement. (Occasionally, these discourses fuse to form something more confusing and misleading. For example, *Liberation 40* asserts that Chamorros in pre-World War II Guam lived in a “tranquil paradise” where the “outside world” was just “beginning to touch” the islands – this, despite several hundred years of colonization by the Spanish.) Diaz encourages us to discover alternative ways of thinking about and discussing cultural encounters in island history. Similarly, in his introductory chapter to *Social Change in the Pacific Islands*, Albert Robillard asserts that conventional Western discourses of social change are as “socially produced” as, for example, indigenous creation myths and calls for the development of alternative discourses. A postmodern critique of the language of theories of Pacific island social change, he hopes, “will bring us, indigenous islander and Westerner alike, into a new and direct relationship with language, opening spaces for creating anew an even more diverse Pacific islands” (Robillard 1992, 1–2).

In a discussion of anthropology and ethnohistory, Greg Denning writes that models employed by ethnohistorians can be as misleading as the “ethnographic present” model often used by anthropologists. Ethnohistorians, he writes,

sometimes catch a culture in a moment romantically gilded by the knowledge of the horrors that are to come. They have a static, partial model of culture contact, a notion of fatal impact. It is as if the culture produced in reaction to intrusion is a lesser culture, as if there is culture at one moment and a cultural vacuum in the next. (Denning 1980, 39)

Most interpretations of Micronesian history and contemporary affairs on film and video, as we shall see, are informed by a discourse of cultural vacuum, tragedy, and fatal impact.

Each of the films produced by the TTPI Education Department in 1969 on the six districts begins with an explicit statement about the timelessness of the various people and culture. Looking at images of Yap, we are told that “people live as they always have”; in Palau “people live much as they did in the past.” Except for some discussion of small-scale economic development, these films generally emphasize a lack of change. This depiction, however, does not reflect the policies of the American administration at the time, which had been pouring more and more money into the islands since the early 1960s. The money allocated for education, for example,

increased dramatically during this time, yet scenes of schools or what was taking place inside classrooms – with the exception of a short scene of the building of a new elementary school in Palau – are almost completely absent. References to political and social changes are also conspicuously absent in these films. No mention is made of the then newly formed Congress of Micronesia, for example, except a passing reference in the film *Ponape District*.

Most other films and videos about Micronesia include to some extent a discussion of change. In *Lamotrek: Heritage of an Island*, for example, the narrator explicitly acknowledges the fact that changes have occurred on this small central Carolinian atoll. Unlike films that do not place a people and their culture within a historical context, this one tells us that although “time hasn’t passed [the people of Lamotrek] by, they still practice a wide range of traditional skills.” This acknowledgement of change while emphasizing the continuation of traditional skills is also reflected in *The Navigators*, *Atolls of Kiribati*, and *Mokil*.

It is worth noting that these are all films or videos about atolls. As such, there appears to be a bias toward viewing atoll cultures as the only sites where tradition is maintained and where change comes slowly. As Norman Douglas (personal communication, February 1991) has suggested, the atoll represents the quintessential Pacific island for Westerners. Filmmakers tend to overlook or ignore the persistence of custom and tradition on high islands. Images of traditional culture tend to be reduced to superficial signs, such as dress and buildings made of local materials, while some of the more fundamental aspects such as social relationships and values are ignored. These latter aspects of a culture are immaterial and less tangible and therefore more difficult to capture on film.

One theme prevalent in the films and videos is the idea of a paradise lost. An independently produced film about the TTP1 that illustrates this theme is *That Uncertain Paradise*. The tone of the film is essentially that Micronesians have been forced into a complex world for which, on account of their simplicity and innocence, they are unprepared and unable to effectively adapt to or cope with. Part Two begins with a shot of an airplane while the narrator describes the path of Micronesians as leading from “the torturous road of ancient primitive culture to the complexity of twentieth-century Western civilization,” “through an uncertain present toward the future of jet planes and international complication.”

The history briefly presented is a colonial history, tracing European and

American domination under which the “changed” islanders were rendered powerless. The beauty of women is referred to as “legendary” and “proverbial.” In anticipation of arriving on an outer island, the narrator claims that “surely the bare-breasted maidens will welcome us” as the ship enters the placid lagoon on a moonlit night. Field trip ships to outer islands “carry with them the romance of the South Seas.” And, ironically, in what appears to be an attempt to dispel stereotypes about Pacific Islanders, the narrator notes that the popular notion of islanders “lazing around” is not true – anymore.

The notion of a traditional culture that is dying out is strongly prevalent throughout the film. Images of the islands show sewing machines, radios, imported food, and houses built of imported materials. The implication is that these people are not *supposed* to acquire such goods, and when they do they are no longer Micronesian. Indeed, we are informed that “to see the *real* Micronesia” one must go to an outer island, implying that life on a high island or district center is somehow inauthentic or not truly Micronesian.<sup>12</sup> Micronesian cultures are almost a “romantic memory,” as the narrator predicts that “another thing of beauty will be gone” as more ships reach the outer islands more often. Keeping culture alive in the present is “a hobby” rather than a natural ongoing process.

*South Pacific: End of Eden?* (1978) is perhaps the best example of a film that expresses the paternalistic notion that innocent Pacific Islanders should not be exposed to “the modern world.” Though largely concerned with Melanesia, the film addresses the effects of the hydrogen bomb tests on Enewetak. In what could very well be a parody of fatal impact discourse, narrator James Michener reflects on the changes that have occurred in the Pacific. These “direct survivors of the Stone Age” have been transported into “the modern world” in just a few decades: “Oceania almost overnight began to lose its innocence.” “The modern world is threatening to overwhelm the native people” who face a “bleak future”:

How long can it last unspoiled? In a few years many of these timeless places will be barely recognizable. This is our very last glimpse at a diverse and unique corner of the planet before it plunges headlong and irretrievably into the mainstream of the modern world.

Referring to the islands as “timeless” reflects the ahistorical bias of this type of discourse. That the islands will “plunge irretrievably” into “the modern world” suggests that blending the modern with the traditional is

impossible. The film does predict that the islanders “will survive this revolution, somehow and in some form,” just as they have survived the intrusions of missionaries, colonialism, and bombs, but implies that they certainly will not be islanders anymore. Their essential primitiveness will be lost.

Change is the predominant theme of the videos in the Micronesian Transitions Series. Foremost among these is *Changes in Truk*, a 1979 video exploring alcohol use, the expansion of the airstrip in Chuuk, and the activities of the youth bureau. *Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go* looks at the changing roles of young adults in contemporary Chuuk society, while *USDA Needy Family Food Program in Truk* examines the impact of an American-funded program on economic and nutritional aspects of life in Chuuk. *Met Poraus? (What's the News?)* and Dennis O'Rourke's *Yap: How Did You Know We'd Like TV?* explore the introduction and use of media on island societies. And the various changes rendered in Marshallese society as a direct result of the American nuclear testing program are vividly portrayed in films about the Marshalls. In *The Marshall Islands: A Matter of Trust*, for example, the narrator at the opening of the video says that “times change,” explaining that life before European contact was hard but all people had access to resources and thus were able to thrive in their atoll environments. After a brief trace of European contact, the narrator comments that today little of the traditional past exists, as we view scene after scene of cars and trucks, bars, cigarettes, Budweiser, and VCRs. Adam Horowitz in *Home on the Range* juxtaposes old footage of traditional Marshallese canoes with children playing with toy canoes made of discarded aluminum cans. “Money changes everything,” comments an older Marshallese man in the film.

The editing of many films and videos makes statements about the social and cultural messages contained in them. Filmmakers like Horowitz and O'Rourke rely on juxtaposed images of the traditional versus the modern to highlight the irony and absurdity of aspects of contemporary Micronesian life. In *Echoes of War* the filmmakers introduce Micronesian cultures with scenes showing Micronesian dance and architecture. These scenes are relatively long and aesthetically photographed; the viewer is given the chance to reflect on the sophisticated skills and beauty these images show. Immediately following these scenes come noisy, cluttered, fast-paced sequences of shots of video games and other American products and influences. The camera's roving eye prevents the viewer from focusing too long

on any particular element in the frames. The effect is a sense of confusion, instability, and disorder, in direct contrast with the sense of stability, order, and dignified presence the scenes of traditional Micronesia convey. This black-and-white dichotomy between tradition and modernity that the filmmakers set up does not make room for a consideration of the tension, ambivalence, and complexity involved in coping with a rapidly changing society.

What differs among the films and videos that address the subject of change are the sources of change and the attitudes expressed about the effects and quality of change. Some filmmakers attribute change primarily to the effects of colonialism, implying that this type of change inevitably leads to the death of a culture as a foreign culture replaces an indigenous one. In contrast, a film like *That Uncertain Paradise* also conveys a sense of cultural crisis leading to cultural death, but subtly sends the message that the inherent inability of Micronesians to deal with their changing world is at fault.

Attitudes like these about culture change are reminiscent of early social science interpretations of millenarian movements in Melanesia. In a study of the "Vailala Madness" on the Gulf Coast of Papua in the first decades of this century, the Australian anthropologist F. E. Williams (1977) saw the "madness" manifested in these movements in terms of social pathology and cultural breakdown, resulting from a genuine innate weakness of the people. Williams referred to these people as "cultural hybrids" who had been denaturalized and had ceased to be true natives. Similarly, social science explanations of change in Micronesia have tended to portray the area as an "international basketcase," a place where people have lost the ability to think and act creatively (Hanlon 1982, 23-27).

Other films, while critical of change, do not imply that all change is necessarily destructive. *Micronesia: Our Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands* handles the subject of culture change differently. The filmmakers attend to signs of modernization and foreign influence while recognizing that these "independent island people" continue to live much as they have for centuries. This film stresses aspects that make Micronesian cultures unique rather than signs of debilitating acculturation. Palauans, for example, have retained their own history in a unique way through the production of storyboards. Though contemporary life is changing, old traditions and customs remain a part of daily life.

*O'Rourke's Vision of Micronesia*

Examples of different approaches to the subject of change are two films about the media in Micronesia. In *Yap: How Did You Know We'd Live TV?*, Dennis O'Rourke romanticizes the traditional and condemns the modern. The film highlights what O'Rourke sees as the weird, inappropriate adoption of American culture, as in a Yapese TV broadcaster's report:

This is Willy Gorongfel with a report from Falalop, Ulithi. The music you hear is from the U.S. Navy Band. You are at Ulithi for the high school graduation, so keep watching WAAB-TV. See the graduates walking up. The boys look great in their red, white and blue outfits.

O'Rourke's ironic tone in the film is evident when he shows scenes of a traditional hair-cutting ceremony for a young boy at which the boy is presented with an American-style birthday cake and wrapped gifts; a scene in which a Japanese tourist drinks a coconut while a Yapese man in the background drinks a can of beer; and in the scenes of things American in Yap, such as the American-style graduation, a Navy band, and commercials for Western products. The film's opening text claims that "the people [of the Trust Territory] are abandoning their culture and turning to American values and institutions." Yapese culture is described as "fragile." "Now in Yap," the lines continue, "village people sit in palm-thatch and tin-roof houses watching eight hours of American commercial television every day." O'Rourke carefully presents the viewer with scenes of apparently listless, zombie-like television watchers.

In contrast, *Met Poraus?*, while concerned mostly with print and broadcast media, suggests that audio-visual media such as television and video might effectively be used by the people of Chuuk as a means of spreading news and information since print media tend to be largely insignificant in Chuuk. Though one might argue that television in Yap is not being used in the way suggested in *Met Poraus?*, one might also argue that O'Rourke sees the introduction of a foreign technology such as television as something that unspoiled Micronesians are not capable of adapting to or exploiting for their own benefit. The implication is that Micronesians need O'Rourke to evaluate the appropriateness of television for them since most of them are unable to evaluate it for themselves. Television in Yap

does not fit O'Rourke's idea of what Yapese culture should be. He seems to be suggesting that television will ultimately destroy a once-thriving culture.

O'Rourke suggests the CIA has connections with the taping company. It is a conspiracy, some of the people interviewed contend, to promote American cultural values and ideas in order to maintain a close relationship between Yap and the United States. As in many of his other films about the Pacific, O'Rourke's vision is inflected with romanticism.<sup>13</sup> Whether it be colonial officials, missionaries, or tourists, his disdain for Western intrusion is quite clear. One must be careful, however, in taking this filmmaker's subjects too literally: they are often metaphors for broader concerns. In *Yap*, O'Rourke's narrative uses the introduction of American television programming in Yap as a metaphor for cultural imperialism in general. His images work best when taken metaphorically. The most provocative – and indeed most troubling – point in *Yap* is not whether allegations of CIA involvement are valid, but that the effects of cultural and political domination may result in any case.

Cultural imperialism, however, involves two parties. O'Rourke's portrayal of the Yapese in response to these forces needs to be questioned. He interviews only a few Yapese who express concerns about television; most others appear to have accepted its introduction. O'Rourke's images focus on the role of the imperialistic forces at the expense of exploring ways in which the Yapese have rejected or appropriated this new medium. Some of the images in the film reveal signs of resistance and appropriation. For example, a scene in which a family is "watching" a local news broadcast is rich in such signs. The family members only occasionally glance toward the television. One woman makes a lei. When the broadcasters – one a Yapese, the other an American – appear on the screen, the family appears to exchange jokes about them. What is going on here? Though the meaning of this behavior is not clear, O'Rourke does not focus on its potentially revealing significance. Instead, the inclusion of this scene is presumably intended to document the large number of hours that unwitting Yapese families spend in the presence of this intrusive object. O'Rourke does manage to capture a bit of Yapese cynicism about foreigners, however. In one scene, an American playing horseshoes suggests a different technique to his Yapese opponent. "Yeah, I need a lesson from you," the man coolly

states in response. One wonders what other subtle dynamics are at work in Yapese society that might suggest that the Yapese are in more control of the changes in their society.

*American Colonialism in Perspective: "This Paradise is Radioactive"*

The destructive impact of American involvement on Micronesian society is most clearly apparent in the films about the Marshall Islands, where the powerfully explosive forces of nuclear bombs are depicted both historically and metaphorically to describe the severe impact on that society. In *Bikini Reports* we are informed that "this paradise is radioactive." The abuse of U.S. authority in the islands is visually portrayed in juxtaposed scenes of detonated bombs and disenfranchised islanders, creating a convincing and unnerving sense of irony, contradiction, and betrayal. The neat surroundings on Kwajalein are juxtaposed with the overcrowded urban area on Ebeye in *Home on the Range*. The displacement of various groups of Marshall Islanders and the protracted efforts at returning them to their homelands are documented on film. These people and others affected in some way by the nuclear testing are clearly portrayed as victims of American insensitive attitudes and unfair policies. Viewers do get a sense of Marshall Islanders responding to the injustices inflicted upon them. They are seen requesting compensation and inspecting their contaminated islands and the homes built on them by the Americans, for example, and in *Home on the Range* they take on land-rights issues over the U.S. military's use of Kwajalein.

Though dealing with a different colonial ruler, the makers of the film *Go Tell it to the Judge* attempt to portray the complex power dynamics between the colonized (the Banabans) and the colonizer (the British) in colonial transactions. Through a series of reenactments, the viewer learns that the Banabans did not understand the true nature of the original document they signed with the British Phosphate Company (BPC). The colonial administrator, Sir Arthur Grimble, tried to persuade the islanders to sell more land, but they resisted, eventually distrusting both the BPC and Grimble. The significant role that women played in resisting further exploitation by the BPC is highlighted. The Banabans take their case to court, demanding compensation for their devastated homelands. One side is not simply shown as overpowering, the other retreating: The colonized are weaker in the face of colonial coercion and exploitation but show

signs of resistance. They struggle to regain control of their land and sovereignty and to receive compensation for their depleted environment.

American influence on youth in Chuuk is the subject of *Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go* (1977). This video produced by students at Xavier High School contrasts traditional Chuuk society with the changes young people are experiencing in contemporary society, concluding that today's youth are "unable to cope with these changes." As the camera follows a young man holding a radio walking down the road, the video opens with the question "Where is the youth going today in Chuuk?" This scene is followed by a series of shots in which we see bars, motorcycles, radios, knives, and fighting. We are told that the young men in these scenes are "no longer the illiterate youth wearing lava-lavas"; they have new needs and desires because the "infiltration of Western ideals and way of life have pressured him to make changes and adaptations."

Many of the films express concern about the future of Micronesian children. Older people are shown engaged in traditional activities while the younger people are shown "hanging out" on the side of the road, usually drinking alcohol. The old want to maintain more of a traditional lifestyle, but the young are adventurous and eager for change. Western-style education has taught them to liberally question and argue about aspects of their own society, such as the power of traditional chiefs. They have little respect for adults, and parents have lost control of their children, now depending on the police to maintain order. As one older man comments, young people "are just fooling with us." They have too much freedom and "the right to do whatever they want."

But this alleged newfound freedom seems not to have liberated the young people of Micronesia. Instead, they appear confused and hopeless. *Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go* illustrates these themes well. The music in the video is cleverly selected to support the images and text. We hear The Beatles' song "Who Am I (Without You By My Side?)," suggesting a sense of confusion about one's identity, an inability to define oneself without depending on American values and material goods. "Yesterday," another Beatles' song, highlights the contrast between the past and the present:

Yesterday  
 All my troubles seemed so far away  
 Now it looks as though they're here to stay  
 Oh I believe in yesterday

Now, I'm not half the man I used to be  
 There's a shadow hanging over me  
 Yesterday came suddenly

In *Home on the Range* young musicians sing Beatles' tunes translated into Marshallese.

Alcohol use and abuse and suicide among young people are mentioned in several of the documentaries of the 1970s and 1980s, suggesting that young people have turned to these as a way of coping with the tensions of being a young person in a society gone berserk, a society being eaten away by PacMan. The ubiquitous scenes of young people in pool halls, playing video games and consuming imported products, suggest that instead of adopting the traditional values of their parents, they have become unwitting participants in a "Coca-Cola culture" whose inappropriate values are causing the breakdown of their societies. Education has raised aspirations in a society unable to meet many of the expectations of the young. The message conveyed about young people in Micronesia is that their future is inevitably bleak, uncertain at best. Like the old, the young people, too, are the victims of American colonialism.

In sharp contrast to these portrayals of the effects of colonialism, the American presence in wartime Guam is heralded as a saving grace in *Liberation 40*. American troops are portrayed as liberators, the Japanese as offensive invaders. Chamorros displayed a sense of duty and patriotism to America, showing their desire to reestablish a "meaningful and lasting relationship" with the United States. The Japanese "tested the spirit and will of the Chamorro people" and found them "strong and resilient." This film is quite unusual in its representations of both Americans and Micronesians. Here Americans have restored order rather than created chaos; Chamorros have rebounded from suffering and change rather than perished from it. In most other films and videos we are presented with precisely the opposite view.

### *Depicting Dependence*

Economic dependence is another theme depicted in many of the films and videos. *Mokil* (1948) makes some profound statements about changing economic patterns as a result of American influences. Intended to be the voice of a man from Mwoakilloa reflecting on the changes on his island, the narrator states that "we look up to these big men" in reference

to traders who stop on the island. There is “more and more to buy, to learn to need and want” as islanders trade locally produced goods for cash and exchange the cash for foreign-produced goods. “Before the Americans came” there was more cooperation and things were produced for their value and use on the island rather than for the value that traders put on certain goods. The main export is copra, which requires sizable amounts of land to make big profits. As a result, we see how land boundaries have become important and less is shared as people strive to produce copra to make money. The film predicts increased emigration from the atoll to Pohnpei, in search of greater wealth, and suggests increased dissatisfaction among the islanders with life on their island. Employment in the wage economy, funded by the United States, had already begun to lure people away from the atoll in the late 1940s.

But *Mokil* also points out internal factors involved in culture change on the atoll. Tension in the community over land is traced back to a typhoon that struck the atoll in the eighteenth century. The subsequent redivision of land eventually created “great disparities in the land holdings of families and individuals” (Kiste and Schaefer 1974, 716). A high rate of population growth put more pressure on the limited resources of the atoll and consequently contributes to increased emigration to the district center.

Twenty years later economic issues are addressed in the TTPI Education Department films. In contrast to the questions raised in *Mokil*, however, these films are constructed to depict successful economic development taking place in the islands. The opening scenes of *Ponape* show islanders planting “miracle rice” imported from the Philippines, followed by scenes of pepper and copra production. In *Truk* we see farmers bringing their produce to the market, a market we are told is expanding, as well as some footage of a copra cooperative. The people of Yap and Palau are successful taro growers, and “no one goes hungry here.” Scenes of fishing appear in all the films. It is clear that the films are intended to portray a sense of self-sufficiency in the islands as well as a viable export economy based on copra production.

What this series of films chooses not to address is Micronesia’s growing economic dependence on the United States. By 1969 this dependency had clearly begun to mount; indeed, even in *Mokil* (produced in 1948) this theme is addressed. Dependency is the major theme in *USDA Needy Family Food Program in Truk* (1979). The video opens with a scene of a ship delivering hundreds of bags of imported rice and continues with some

rather striking visual images of a garbage dump overflowing with a host of discarded cans and bottles of imported food and drink and a series of shots in quick succession of people opening can after can of food. The narrator claims the program has had an “impact” on the entire population, in that everyone takes advantage of the program. Changes in working and eating habits have resulted; people spend less time fishing and farming as the food provided by the program is substituted for local food. Less fresh fish is available in the markets since fewer people go fishing. The imported food products are less nutritious as well.

The music in this video serves a similar purpose as in *Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go*. The words of the song “Help!” by The Beatles convey a sense of irony as we watch truckloads of USDA food being unloaded and distributed:

Help! I need somebody  
Help! Not just anybody  
Help!

When I was younger, so much younger than today  
I never needed anybody’s help in any way  
But now those days are gone  
And I’m not so self-assured  
But now I find, I’ve changed my mind  
I’ll open up the doors

Help me if you can, I’m feeling down  
And I do appreciate you bein’ round  
Help me get my feet back on the ground  
Won’t you please, please help me

And now my life has changed in oh so many ways  
My independence seems to vanish in the haze  
But every now and then I feel so insecure  
I know that I just need you like  
I’ve never done before

The failure of transplanted American values and goods to establish a satisfactory relationship between Micronesia and the United States is also suggested by the use The Beatles’ “Can’t Buy Me Love” in *Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go*. That the mostly Micronesian filmmakers choose to play music immensely popular in America as we watch images of Micronesia

underscores the extent to which American influence has infiltrated Chuuk society, as well as the extent to which they remain dissatisfied with a relationship of dependency on the United States. The irony works well.

The conclusion of the filmmakers in *USDA Needy Family Food Program in Truk* is that the program has potential benefits but they are not being realized. The money saved from buying less food, for example, could be spent on housing and economic improvements such as purchasing building materials or equipment for fishing and farming, but most of the money that would have been spent on food was going toward “luxury” items such as clothes and entertainment. Thus the film is not simply an indictment of massive dependence created by the United States. Rather, the film investigates how the people of Chuuk have made use of the program in ways that might or might not be for their own long-term benefit. We see people from Chuuk making choices in their lives, responding to U.S. “aid” in ways they perceive to be appropriate.

Similarly, in another film a man opens a can of USDA tinned meat and feeds it to a dog, a disturbing image intended to illustrate some of the problems of dependency created by American aid. But viewed in a different light, that image conveys a sense of irony – that Micronesians are using the USDA food program for “needy” families to their advantage. Furthermore, one can read signs of Micronesian resistance into that image: American aid will be fed to the dogs.

These films stress the theme of dependency and a lack of self-sufficiency created by the United States. The message is that rather than promoting self-reliance, American influence has taught Micronesians to be consumers rather than producers. The United States is unequivocally indicted for its failure to fulfill the responsibilities to foster economic development as described in the United Nations Trusteeship Agreement. This view is unlikely to be contested by many. But the way Micronesians are portrayed as having responded to America’s actions needs to be questioned. Many of the films and videos include images that can be interpreted in ways counter to the point of view posited by the filmmakers.

*Micronesia: From Paradise to Wasteland*

There are, indeed, some positive representations of Micronesia. Films and videos such as *The Navigators*, *Micronesië*, *Lamotrek*, and *With the First Canoe* present Micronesian navigation, dance, and other customs in a way that affirms the sophistication and persistence of many indigenous

ways. In the context of Micronesia responding to and adapting to a wider world, however, these positive representations disappear.

One of the themes related to Micronesia's response to the American administration is that Micronesians have been left demoralized and are in the midst of an identity crisis, on both an individual and a collective level. The young people in *Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go* are said to be unable to control the changes occurring in their society; they have become confused and resort to alcohol and suicide as a way to deal with problems. The older people are "not so passive" in responding to changes. In this and other films, Micronesians are portrayed as a people who don't know who they are; their cultures are either entirely lost or on the verge of being lost; and they are confused about their present state as well as their future. Their cultures are interpreted as fragile and the people unable to deal with the present world. Micronesians are, in effect, impure products going crazy.<sup>14</sup>

*Echoes of War* (1985) and *Strategic Trust: The Making of a Nuclear Free Palau* (1984) are examples of videos that portray Micronesians as impure products. In *Echoes of War* we are told that American policy in Micronesia has left Micronesians "demoralized," with no feelings of self-respect or self-esteem. Similarly, in *Strategic Trust* we are told that a sense of hopelessness and helplessness pervades contemporary Micronesian society, and that their society shows signs of "cultural schizophrenia." The "Frontline" segment about Palau asserts that years of struggle between the United States and Palau over Palau's future political status have "left this once placid nation nearly bankrupt, and torn by political chaos, violence and murder." The viewer gets the impression that Micronesians have completely lost confidence in themselves, that they are left without dignity, and that they have given up trying to maintain or create a sense of cultural, social, or political identity. The message is that Micronesia is a lost cause, at least part of which can be attributed to the inability and failure of simple, weak, nonadaptive people to respond to complex outside forces.

Few images of the Micronesians consistently convey a sense of a people who are actively responding, at least on a political level, to foreign forces and influences. *Doing it Right: Democracy in the Pacific* focuses on the series of political initiatives in Palau from the ratification of Palau's constitution to Palauan testimonials in Washington, D.C., and at the United Nations in the late 1980s. In this video, produced by the Institute for

Pacific Development Policy, it is clear that Palauans are “no longer unquestioning host” to American values and U.S. policies. Near the end of *Strategic Trust* we see several examples of Palauan attempts to understand, promote, or reject the Compact of Free Association – for example, in their successful attempt to delay the first plebiscite in 1983 – documented on film. One female elder, for example, delivers a short speech advising voters to critically examine change in their society. Though one could argue that these documentaries are essentially political propaganda, nonetheless they show some of the few images of Micronesians actively taking a part in shaping their present and future.

*With the First Canoe* documents the art of tattooing in Micronesia, taking care to consider the different and changing patterns, styles, and meanings of tattoos within and among the islands. The film is not simply a historical account of an art form lost or fading away, however. The film makes hints at the theme of the emergence of a positive Micnesian self-image throughout much of the film, a theme ultimately revealed near the end when two young Micnesians are shown receiving traditional forms of tattoos. Leading up to this climax of sorts are many scenes of younger people interviewing elders about their tattoos. These scenes prove to be some of the most interesting in the film, as the viewer senses a current generation’s nascent interest not only in tattooing but also in exploring identities past and negotiating identities present. The film affirms the cultural identity of the peoples of Micronesia without denying the impact of colonization.

In *Echoes of War* the filmmakers attempt to consider islander agency. A Palauan man discusses the tension that he claims many Micnesians experience on both a personal and national level over tradition and modernity. Although the narrator claims Palauans are “sold on the American dream,” the Palauan interviewee makes it clear that at least some people are ambivalent about buying into the American dream, that they are consciously struggling with choices. Despite this interview – one of the few with Micnesians in the films and videos – the images that surround this segment support the claim that all the negative impacts of colonialism have so engulfed Micronesia that any struggle to change or mitigate them is useless.

The narrator in *Strategic Trust* states that the present-day situation in Palau “could have been very different”; in *Echoes of War* the narrator asks the question “Where did American policymakers go wrong?” Both com-

ments imply that the colonizer's role is really the only active and influential one, reflecting the stress on politics and dominance as the overriding frame of analysis for colonial transactions in these videos. An alternative question that could have been explored is, how have interactions between American policymakers and administrators and Micronesians created the situation that exists? This is not to suggest that power between the two groups is equal, but a question like this at least considers the role of Micronesians in their own history.

In the book *Gone Primitive*, Marianna Torgovnick uses the metaphor of a carnival to discuss how we might better understand what some see as the replacement of "traditional" cultures with a more oppressive global culture. At a carnival, images become distorted (as in the "house of mirrors"); masculine/feminine and human/animal identities become ambiguous; life passes by at a whirl. She suggests we rejoice in these festivities rather than lament over its oddity:

The third world now includes many signs of the West, signs we should conceive of not as "cultural impurities," but as cultural facts that can lead us to a number of possibilities. (Torgovnick 1990, 40)

Greg Dening reminds us, too, that culture is process: "One moment is no more hybrid than the last, one response no less creative than that which was made before" (Dening 1980, 39). But, as Torgovnik carefully points out,

the problem with the carnival idea, applied too uncritically, is that it ignores the real social and economic cost of the global village. . . . Behind the festivities are social and economic facts we should not forget. (Torgovnick 1990, 40-41)

Rather than rejoice in its spectacle, makers of films and videos about Micronesia condemn signs of the West. Most of them have certainly not ignored or forgotten the social and economic cost to Micronesians that colonial intrusion has brought. But contemporary Micronesia, indeed teeming with signs of the West, is full of future possibilities, possibilities that most filmmakers have not envisioned in their attempts to represent a realistic Micronesia.<sup>15</sup>

On the whole, images of Micronesia on film and video in relation to American colonialism are overwhelmingly negative, diffused with a discourse of tragedy and fatal impact. These documentaries focus on the

impact of colonialism and domination at the expense of exploring ways in which Micronesians have resisted or adapted to this process. On one hand, the policies and influence of the American administration of the TTPI are clearly portrayed as adversely affecting Micronesia: the United States bombed atolls in the Marshalls, has struggled with Palau over its future political status, and has created massive levels of economic dependency throughout the region. But on the other hand, Micronesians are often portrayed as demoralized, undignified “cultural schizophrenics” who have given up hope for a better future.

While the images of Micronesia on film may accurately document some aspects of Micronesian history, the messages and interpretations these films and videos make need to be contested. The common Western perception of the Pacific as a paradise is not being perpetuated in the documentaries about Micronesia. Instead, this myth is being replaced by a new myth, one that takes the opposite extreme: Micronesia is a wasteland. By selecting fragments of social reality, filmmakers miss the fullness and complexity of life in Micronesia. More complex representations of Micronesia are co-opted by both of these myths.

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## Notes and References

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1. However, Rosaleen Smyth presented a paper titled “Reel History: The Pacific Islands on Film, Television and Video” at the ANU Workshop on Pacific History, Research School of Asian and Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, December 3–5, 1993.

2. The most complete catalogue of Pacific Islands films and videos is Miller (1989). This catalogue lists more than seven hundred film and videos, of which about 35 percent are primarily about Hawai'i. The catalogue includes feature films as well as documentaries about the Pacific.

3. The best example of this type of commentary is found in Moorehead (1967).

4. For example, *Pacific, the Island to Island War* (1973), *Crusade in the Pacific* (1986), and *World War II: The Pacific War – America Takes the Offensive* (n.d.).

5. For example, *Mwan Mwich* (1979), *Agharup Dancers: Songs and Dances of the Northern Mariana Islands* (1980), *Micronesië* (1985), *Celebrating the Art of Micronesia* (1986), *The Fifth Festival of Pacific Arts* (1988), and *Kle Belau: Palau through the Eyes of Reuer Charlie Gibbons* (1989).

6. This is a privately produced “home video” purchased by the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa library.

7. Joseph Camacho, in comments delivered at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies’ 14th Annual Pacific Islands Studies Conference, Honolulu, November 1–4, 1989.

8. Since that time, Ponape has been officially renamed Pohnpei, and Truk has changed to Chuuk. Palau is referred to as both Belau and Palau.

9. For example, McHenry’s *Trust Betrayed* (1975), Gale’s *The Americanization of Micronesia* (1977), Nevin’s *The American Touch in Micronesia* (1977), and Nufer’s *Micronesia Under American Rule* (1978).

10. Videos in this series include *Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go* (1977), *Early Foreign Contacts in Micronesia* (1978), *Changes in Truk* (1979), *USDA Needy Family Food Program in Truk* (1979), *Mwan Mwich* (1979), *Lamotrek Atoll: Research Film Footage of a Traditional Carolinian Society* (1983), and *Met Poraus? (What’s the News?)* (1983).

11. For example, *Nuclear Free Pacific* (1981), *A Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific* (1983), and *Niukla Fri Pasifik* (1988).

12. Similar notions are found in the travel literature on Micronesia, most notably in Stanley (1989).

13. For example, *Ileksen* (1977), *Sharkcallers of Kontu* (1982), and *Cannibal Tours* (1987).

14. This phrase is taken from the introduction to Clifford (1988).

15. Bell Hooks, in a speech at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa (November 1991), criticized several recent African-American filmmakers for their “realistic” representations of African-Americans. She claims that a white, conservative ideology has infiltrated their narratives. While art can reflect reality, she argues that it should also be used to explore visions of possible better futures.

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- The Northern Marianas: Islands in the Sun*. U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Territorial and International Affairs. n.d. 17 minutes, sound, color. VHS video format.
- Nothing to Do, Nowhere to Go*. Prod. by Xavier High School Media Center. Dist. by Triton Films. 1977. 60 minutes, b/w, sound. VHS video format. Part of the Micronesian Transitions Series.
- Nuclear Exiles*. Prod. by National Geographic Society. Dist. by SuperStation WTBC, Atlanta, Ga. 1987. 28 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- Nuclear Exodus*. Dir. by Chris Cooper. Prod. by Aroha Production in association with Television New Zealand. 1986. 12 minutes, color and b/w.
- Oceania*. Prod. by McGraw Hill. Dist. by CRM. 1968. 16 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film.
- Operation Crossroads*. Prod. by U.S. Navy. Dist. by National Audiovisual Center. 1949. 27 minutes, b/w. 16mm film; VHS, Beta video formats.
- Pacific Island*. Prod. and dist. by Indiana University. 1949. 18 minutes, b/w. 16mm film.
- Pacific Paradise?* Prod. by Oliver Howes and Dennis O'Rourke. Dist. by Film Australia; Journal Films. 1988. 30 minutes, color, sound. All video formats.
- Pacific, the Island to Island War*. Prod. by Thames Television. Dist. by Thorne EMI Video. 1973. 52 minutes, color and b/w, sound. VHS video format.

- Palau District*. Prod. and dist. by Cleo. 1969. 12 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film. Part of the Micronesia Series.
- Palau Plebiscite '86: A Video Testimony*. Prod. by Options 2000. Dist. by Nuclear Sovereignty Project. 1987. 22 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- Peoples of the Island World*. Prod. and dist. by BFA. 1967. 17 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film.
- The Polynesians of Kapingamarangi*. Prod. and dist. by Bishop Museum. 1980. 53 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film.
- Ponape District*. Prod. and dist. by Cleo. 1969. 13 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film. Part of the Micronesia Series.
- The Precarious Balance*. Prod. by Human Studies Film Archives and Office of Telecommunications. Dist. by Smithsonian Institution. ca. 1987. 10 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- The Puzzle of Palau* (Segment of "20/20" television show, July 2, 1987). ca. 20 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- Radio Bikini*. Prod. by Robert Stone; PBS Video; New Dimensions; Pacific Arts Video. 1988. 60 minutes, sound. 16mm film; VHS, U-matic video formats.
- Remember Enewetak!* (Segment of "60 Minutes" television show, May 18, 1986). Prod. by John Tiffin. ca. 20 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- Satawalese Canoe Departure from Saipan, Spring 1988, and Traditional Dances*. Prod. and dist. by Michael L. Kenney. 1988. 90 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- Secrets of the Coral Islands*. Prod. and dist. by BBC. 1976. 50 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- Sky of Fire, Seeds of Hope*. Prod. by Pacific Community Development. Dir. by Paul Greco. 1991. 15 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- South Pacific: End of Eden?* Prod. by Reader's Digest. Dist. by Pyramid. 1978. 58 and 25 minutes (2 versions), color, sound. 16mm film; VHS, Beta, 3/4" video formats.
- Strategic Trust: The Making of a Nuclear Free Palau*. Prod. and dist. by Cin-Guild. 1984. 59 minutes, color, sound. VHS video format.
- Sunrise over the Pacific*. No information available.
- That Uncertain Paradise*. Prod. and dist. by WNET/13 Media Services. 1974. 60 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film.

- Trouble in Paradise* (Segment of "Frontline" television show on May 31, 1988). Written and prod. for "Frontline" by Elizabeth Arledge. Prod. by Sylvia Colliert and Alan Haling. Color, sound. vhs video format.
- Truk District*. Prod. and dist. by Cleo. 1969. 12 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film. Part of the Micronesia Series.
- Truk's Legendary Lagoon: A Voyage Back in Time*. Prod. by Lenora Carey. Dist. by AIP Home Video, Inc. 1989. 30 minutes, color, sound. vhs video format.
- USDA Needy Family Food Program in Truk 1978-1979*. Prod. by Xavier High School Media Center. Dist. by Triton Films. 1979. 30 minutes, b/w, sound. vhs video format. Part of the Micronesian Transitions Series.
- Victory at Sea Series: #12 The Conquest of Micronesia (Gilberts and the Marshalls); #17 Turkey Shoot (Marianas)*. Originally released by NBC in 1952 as a 26-part documentary television series. Prod. by NBC-TV. Dist. by Lucerne. 1945. 30 minute segments, b/w, sound. 16mm film.
- With the First Canoe*. Co-prod. by Maria Yatar. 85 minutes, color, 16mm film. No other information available.
- Yap District*. Prod. and dist. by Cleo. 1969. 12 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film. Part of the Micronesia Series.
- Yap: How Did You Know We'd Like TV?* Dir. by Dennis O'Rourke. Prod. and dist. by Ronin Films. 1982. 55 minutes, color, sound. 16mm film; vhs video format. Retitled by the BBC as *South Seas and Soft Soap*.
- Zoning Creates Value, CNMI Zoning Workshop, April 12, 1989*. 1989. 90 minutes, color, sound. vhs video format.
- Zoning Workshop with the CNMI Legislature, April 13, 1989*. Presented by Lane Kending. Taped by Michael L. Kenney. 1989. 120 minutes, color, sound. vhs video format.

## Book Review

Frederic Jameson. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992. \$25 cloth.

As Colin MacCabe notes in his introduction to *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, film currently figures more prominently in Fredric Jameson's writing than it has in the past. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* appeared at the end of 1992, on the heels of *Signatures of the Visible*, his first book devoted to the cinema, which arrived earlier the same year. While *Signatures of the Visible* consists primarily of essays first published between 1977 and 1986, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* is composed of new work. Together, the two books considerably enrich film studies, as they bring to the subject Jameson's awareness and concerns in a variety of areas, including literature, the arts, philosophy, linguistics, and cultural theory. Readers may reject aspects of his approach, ranging from the economic and Marxist basis of his thinking to his interpretation and evaluation of specific films. Yet every reader is likely to be stimulated by his intellectual reach and critical acumen.

The social and historical importance of space has been central to Jameson's thinking about the world at least since he published his highly influential essay, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in 1984. Indeed, his close attention to space, in relation to film as well as society, was already evident in earlier writings, including essays based on the films *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Diva*, published in 1977 and 1982, respectively, and reprinted in *Signatures of the Visible*. One likely reason for this emphasis on space is that he has observed capitalism capture more of the globe with each passing day. Distinctive of late capitalism, he says, is that it pervades human life, even the unconscious, as no system – economic, political, or religious – ever has. In a reprise of the notion of the vanishing American frontier proposed by Frederick Jackson Turner a century ago, Jameson asserts that the frontier has now vanished from our world. No area of human or natural existence remains free of capitalist reification and commodification. No untrammelled space holds the promise of rebirth, or of a better life. Furthermore, the incredible extensiveness of multinational corporate capitalism has put it beyond the grasp and perception of any individual or society. Simultaneously,

late capitalism in its ubiquity has become naturalized – our present condition, which seems endless and eternal, precludes the envisioning of alternatives.

Such obstructions to our imagination and action, related to limitations of sight, grow more extreme and complicated because of the invisibility of the vast technological networks that serve late capitalism. The transmissions and terminals of computer and video information in the employ of advanced reification and commodification lack either the visibility or the photogenic and “iconic force” (*Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 21) of the industrial machinery and vehicles of earlier capitalism. In regard to the photogenic and iconic features of the new technologies, Jameson states in *Signatures of the Visible* (61), “The housing of a computer scarcely embodies or manifests its peculiar energies in the same way that a wing shape or a slanted smokestack do: all of which essentially means that the new reproductive technology – being a matter of *processes* – cannot be represented in the way in which the older mechanical energies found their representation or figuration.” These differences in the relevant technologies make representation of the new world system all the more difficult.

Yet a system it is, Jameson maintains, recalling Theodor Adorno. There exists a whole, or a social totality, to be discerned, even though the appearance of things is often random, fragmentary, and mysterious. It is partly because late capitalism’s disruptive power, while often either invisible or nondescript, necessarily alters the physical world, and hence how space is

configured and experienced, that film seems to Jameson a natural medium in which to espy the overall system. For film is “essentially spatial” (*Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 74), he claims, somewhat as Erwin Panofsky and Andre Bazin did before him. In addition, Jameson suggests that the spatial configurations that exemplify an era, or that evoke the reality of a world system, even one that can never be entirely visible and that ultimately is nonvisual, turn up in its films.

In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Jameson analyzes films of the last twenty years from various parts of the globe in which he finds diverse attempts to represent the new world system. Of course, given the current limits of human understanding and perception, he says, these films are unlikely to be more than mere probes toward inventing “new forms of representation for what it is properly impossible to think or represent” (p. 1). Nevertheless, it is such possibly futile striving toward knowledge and representation that distinguishes the films Jameson considers in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. In *Signatures of the Visible*, on the other hand, his concern was another activity of film and art – the often conservative tendency “to evolve ‘imaginary resolutions of real contradictions,’ to use Lévi-Strauss’s apt formula,” to lend the appearance of harmony and reconciliation to “irresolvable conflicts” (p. 59). The films he discusses in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* are less likely to elide difficulty.

“Cognitive mapping,” a key term in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* that Jameson already was deploying in the 1984 “Cultural Logic” essay to name efforts

to discover clues about the new world system, carries obvious spatial implications. As always, however, Jameson analyzes not only spatial features of the films he selects, but also aspects of narrative, character, and theme. In the course of these complex studies, "conspiracy" emerges as a term almost as crucial as cognitive mapping, and it too has spatial implications without being confined to them. The term pertains to the sensations of anonymous, external, and mysterious danger that permeate human life in these films, including *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men* (both from the United States), *Videodrome* (Canada), *Days of Eclipse* (the former U.S.S.R.), *Terrorizer* (Taiwan), and *Perfumed Nightmare* (the Philippines). In each, major characters are afflicted by faceless forces of late capitalism that exceed their sight and control. Often these forces are ranged against one another, so that individuals are caught within conflicting – as well as impersonal and transgressive – currents of manipulation and control.

Most of the characters in the films analyzed by Jameson scarcely possess the power to substantially alter their circumstances. Rather, as classic post-modern subjects, they lack moral, emotional, and psychological force or depth. They struggle within physical environments that are unusually daunting and confusing. In the society of the spectacle, they are inundated by images that suggest slight logic and purpose and that convey little sense of the past or future. There is simply, or largely, the rush of apparently disconnected visual signs in the present. The succession of narrative incidents, as in *Ter-*

*rorizer*, often seems equally arbitrary. Yet Jameson's characters are not all in the same boat. Kidlat Tahimik, for instance, who stars in his own film, *Perfumed Nightmare*, emerges from the Third World in almost magical circumstances reminiscent of Dovzhenko that allow him unusual distance and rare understanding and release.

Despite Jameson's pessimism about the world's situation, then, he does not find all characters in the cinema utterly defeated; put another way, the subject for him is not entirely dead. Rather, at moments in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* his exploration seems to support Hal Foster's recent announcement (in *October*, 63, p. 10) of the "present return of the subject, . . . the partial recognition of new and ignored subjectivities. . . ." Consequently the new world system seems a mite less overwhelming or totalistic than Jameson at times suggests.

Jameson notes that there are areas of the globe, as in Latin America, where experience is somewhat less processed and commodified than in the standardized centers of late capitalism; his journey in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, which spans more of the world than in *Signatures of Visibility*, does detect pockets and margins of lingering natural richness and truth. Yet less than Robert Stam in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (1989) does Jameson, as he surveys the Asian Pacific Rim in the 1970s and '80s rather than Latin America as Stam does, find the marginal able to enhance itself by cannibalizing aspects of the center. While the marginal survives and in a sense remains more vital than the center, its power in Jameson's

view is distinctly limited as well as precarious.

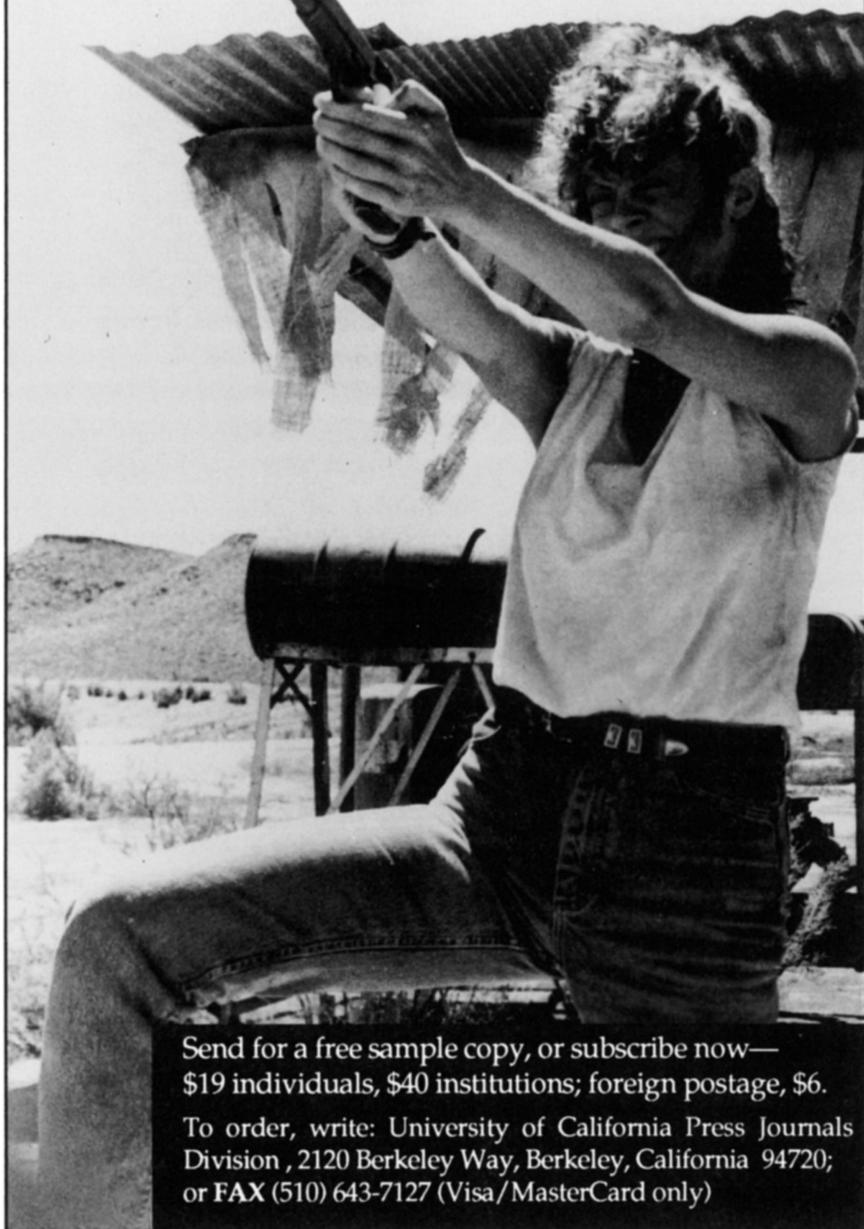
In his exploration of alternatives to mainstream cinema, Jameson stresses the value of much that is commercially, if not geographically, marginal. However, in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* his consideration of the commercially marginal in the West does not include avant-garde films other than Jean-Luc Godard's in the 1980s. Indeed, none of his writing to my knowledge explores the American experimental film tradition, for example, though *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) devotes a chapter to experimental video. A further limitation to his approach may be that his cultural and theoretical ideas overly anticipate, rather than arise from, his experiences of the films he discusses.

Moreover, a few of these films, such as *The Parallax View*, which he considers the "greatest of all assassination films" (*Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 55), seem to me unremarkable from most standpoints other than his. Nevertheless, in its determination to probe the space of late capitalism as well as that of film, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* contributes to the opening up of film studies that has been characteristic of recent years. Often dazzlingly, Jameson sets film in a context that is both interdisciplinary and international, and the ultimate goals he sets for his investigation of the medium, as for his other cultural criticism, are nothing less than human survival and freedom.

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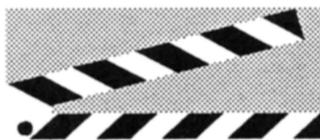
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