

A BRIEF STUDY OF POST-WAR JAPANESE FILMS

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the inner meanings conveyed in two post-war Japanese films: *To live (Ikiru 1952)* directed by Akira Kurosawa and *Villon's Wife (Viyon no tsuma 2009)* by Negishi Kichitarō. Both films are analyzed cinematographically, and compared and contrasted for the directors' different interpretations of issues posed by the postwar in Japan. In my discussion of Kurosawa's *Ikiru*, the work of several critics (James Goodwin, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, Stephen Prince, Tsuzuki Masaaki and others's) is presented and discussed in the first part of the thesis. The film *Villon's Wife*, and the original novel by Dazai Osamu, are studied together with Seki Reiko's and Hirano Ken's interpretations of the fiction in the second part of the thesis. Kurosawa's production of *Ikiru* reflects an attempt to heal the nation and the populace from the hell of defeat, while Kichitarō's *Villon's Wife* is a remarkable break away from the frame of the original novel and provides a progressive view of women's ability to transform their lives.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Hanmo Cong is a purchasing engineer working in Olympus, Shenzhen. She was born in Shenzhen, China in 1986 and spend her first seventeen years there. After her high school graduation, she headed to United States for College. During 2004-2008, she studied Electrical Engineering in University of Arizona. By the end of 2008, she obtained B.S. degree in Electrical Engineering and went back to China to work as a patent assistant in a Law Firm.

One year later, she made a decision to take a break from work and go back to United States to study something completely different from her past educational experience. She went to Conerll University to study Asian Studies in the field of Japanese Literature and Film. After completing all the requirements, she moved back to China.

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## INTRODUCTION

Japan after the World War II has been the subject of much scholarly attention from social scientists and humanists alike. As soon as the Emperor's voice, for the very first time, reached every corner in Japan over the radio, deeply rooted values collapsed, as if into ashes, all at once. People were confused in the chaos of defeat and suffered because of postwar food shortages, economic crises, poor health, and demoralization. Such circumstances meant that almost no one was able to survive without violating the law. Films produced in the post-war period or depicting the post-war period are also quite fascinating and worth much attention. In such a chaotic era, some directors focused their works on pure entertaining instead of anything burdensome and painful. But in this thesis, we will take a close look at two post-war period films, *To Live (Ikiru)* (1952) and *Villon's Wife (Viyon no tsuma)* (2007) with an eye to significant social issues they engaged. *Ikiru* by Kurosawa Akira was itself made shortly after the end of the American Occupation of Japan. *Villon's Wife* by Negishi Kichitaro represents a new spirit and vigor of our own day and age. However, although both films depict approximately the same decade after war, *Ikiru's* ultimately positive viewpoint differs greatly from *Villon's Wife's* pessimistic theme, which retains the mood set by the original author Dazai Osamu. Just as Japanese philosopher Umehara stated in his article, "I was deeply influenced by existentialism at that time. I tried to look at Kurosawa's work with the same attitude as Dazai's and Sakaguchi's, but I couldn't. Unlike them, Kurosawa didn't lose the faith in the hellish society in the end. He wants to believe in humanity and fight hard against the society's evil" (Umehara, 48). It is

particularly interesting to study two films produced in the same period in light of the different philosophies the directors conveyed in the works.

## PART I: IKIRU

### BACKGROUND

We will first take a look on Kurosawa's work. An idealistic yet angry young man in much of the prewar period, Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) dedicated his work to presenting a positive vision to Japanese society at a time when his passion was needed the most. *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidore Tenshi*, 1948), *Stray Dog* (*Nora Inu*, 1949) and *Ikiru* are generally regarded as Kurosawa's post-war chaos trilogy. While *Stray Dog* was filmed to draw the public attention on demoralized veteran issues and *Drunken Angel* produced to gain the public observation on the social issues of the society, *Ikiru* was created hoping to address the issue of how an individual can make ethical choices in a highly bureaucratized modern society. Kurosawa frankly shows his abhorrence towards the corrupted bureaucrats in his autobiography. "There is nothing more dangerous than a worthless bureaucrat who has fallen prey to the trends of the times" (Kurosawa, 119). Thus he expressed his discontent towards the society straightforwardly in his autobiography. As a victim of the stagnant and hypocritical Japanese political system, his hatred of the stagnant and hypocritical Japanese political system was not superficial.

*Ikiru* was produced in the year 1952, one year after the end of the American occupation. As James Goodwin introduces the historical background in his analysis of *Ikiru*, during the occupation period (briefly before the story take place), SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers) was dedicated to the breakup of large

business trusts, or *zaibatsu*, and reform of the civil service bureaucracy. However by the end of the occupation period, the *zaibatsu* regained significant financial control and exerted powerful influence on government. The Allied occupation administration failed to efficiently restructure the government by implementing the reform indirectly, through many of the same agencies in power during wartime (Goodwin, 137). As a result, a majority of bureaucrats remained in place. The protagonist in *Ikiru* might be considered as one of them. The film expresses extreme distrust of who are referred to in the dialogue as *corpses* or *mummies*.

Critics note that Kurosawa had a substantially deep understanding of existentialism, which had an impact on this film. For Kurosawa, existentialism meant that one could only apprehend the true meaning and value of life when facing death directly. Hence, death was not only frequently used to prove the significance of life, but was also useful in edifying and enlightening people about how to live a life. Jeffery Gordon searches for this resolution of meaning of life through a close examination of *Ikiru*. He suggests that the problem of existentialism emerges in the dissonance between our natural standpoint toward our lives and the transcendental perspective we can adopt toward them (Gordon, 138). Fully grasping the postulates of existentialism, Kurosawa regularly questioned himself about his existence. *Ikiru* is a result of his contemplation. He successfully injected the essence of his thought into *Ikiru* in his way of representing contemporary social conditions. The production of *Ikiru* can be seen as a bitter satire of Japanese bureaucrats and a prayer for salvation for younger generations. Although the film was addressing the audience 60 years ago, it is not obsolete for the audience nowadays. The brilliance of the film is still highly

valued by the modern society that in popular polls it is considered one of the best films in Japan's film history over 100 years. Here we are going to look more closely into the plot, cinematography and several critics' views related to the film. (Kinema Junpo Best 10)

## FILM ANALYSIS

### ***Ikiru* – the desire to live**

In his autobiography, Kurosawa states that in Japanese traditional storytelling, there is a legend about toad oil:

Hidden deep in the woods, there lives a toad. The species is so rare that his appearance is worse than the other toads. People captured this toad and put him in a box with mirrors on all four sides. He was shocked by his own hideous appearance and started to sweat. The toad oil, his sweat, turned out to be a cure-all ointment. (Kurosawa 34)

*Ikiru*, like *Stray Dog*, *Drunken Angel*, and many other films directed by Kurosawa Akira, provokes spectators to carry out introspection. The brilliant visual experience created by the director resonates intensely with our minds and bodies, leaving us numerous questions to ponder. In *Ikiru*, the unconventional narrative structure of the film enables a multi-angled mode of storytelling, and can be dissected into two parts around the event of Watanabe's death. The cinematographic skills and tactics utilized in the film helps implement its narrative form. By analyzing the film cinematographically with help from *Mitsuyo Wada Marciano*, James Goodwin,

Stephen Prince and *Mitsuhiro* Yoshimoto's different interpretations, we will be able to explore how cinematography works together with theme in this film.

In discussing *Ikiru*, Kurosawa wrote, "Sometimes I thought about death. *Ikiru* is the product of these contemplations" (Kurosawa, 55). By contrast, the protagonist Watanabe, only starts to search for the meaning of life passively, on the brink of death. His stomach cancer almost functions as a kind of mirror and compels this spiritless man to engage in self-examination and realize about how monotonous and meaningless his life has been.

The composition of frames at the beginning of the film emphasizes contemporary bureaucrats' problems of unconcern and passivity. In the scene where the protagonist first appears, Watanabe is sitting at the desk working absent-mindedly. Behind him are piles of documents like a little hill. He looks at his pocket watch every few minutes as if he's a primary school student impatiently waiting for the class to be over. This scene bitterly satirizes Watanabe's fainéant and unaccomplished life; he is a walking corpse. It was followed by a series of short takes of each of the sections in the city hall: all of the clerks shirk responsibility by referring the slum residents to other sections. Kurosawa created graphic matches by means of composition, lighting and setting and links them up by wipe joins, which artfully emphasized the parallel relationship among them. Beginning with the municipal section, followed by public works section, park section, hygiene section and so on, by framing the clerks frontally and from the side in each section behind the counters, the director suggests a sense of isolation between citizens and government using the physical distance created by the counter. The sections' nameplates are always placed on top of the counter and the

source of the light comes from the left upper corner. Kurosawa further expressed the bureaucrats' lack of concern by seldom matching their eyelines with those of the slum residents. In the series of short takes, all of the clerks respond apathetically to the slum residents' appeal. The indifference and aloofness of the bureaucrats is exquisitely articulated.

His life awaits huge radical change in the hospital. It was too unreal for Watanabe to accept the fact that he has only half a year to live because of the stomach cancer. Kurosawa implements excellent sound-effect to underline Watanabe's emotional breakdown. We can barely hear a sound while Watanabe gets out of the hospital and turns at the corner of the street. He walks along a wall full of posters until a truck rushes by him. The noises in the street all at once come into ear as he begins to cross the street. The sound of the film was removed for more than 30 seconds until the spectators realized about its absence. They immediately realize that the complete silence comes from the inner world of Watanabe. By juxtaposing the silence inside of Watanabe with the noises from the streets, Kurosawa stresses the blankness of the protagonist's mind and subtly delineated his unconsciousness. The expressionistically absent sound, while functioning as a signifier of Watanabe's obsessed state of mind, also enforces a formal cleavage between the character and his environment (Prince, 104). The protagonist Watanabe immerses in his absolute isolation.

Knowing about his doomed faith, Watanabe uses the metaphor of drowning to describe his fear about the death. He tells his former office worker, Toyo, "It feels the same way as the drowning experience I had when I was young. In the darkness, I struggled hard but couldn't find anything to clutch at. Then I saw you." The

protagonist, aware of his imminent death, reacts as if he is a drowning man, who strives to clutch at a final straw. He is scared of his death, just as the toad is scared of its hideous look. But it is not the time for him to sweat the precious cure-all ointment out of himself yet. He made three attempts to rescue himself from drowning in the death ocean of the fear. Hence, it is reasonable to form our discussion with the critics' interpretations in the framework of the three final straws.

The first straw he could think of is his son. In the panic of impending death, Watanabe goes home and sits alone in the dark to wait for his son and daughter-in-law to return. His son and daughter are talking about how to use his pension to build a new house. Overheard their conversation inadvertently, Watanabe is startled and disheartened. He remained speechless when they lectured him about the impropriety of his behavior. Watanabe starts to recall his life in the past. According to Prince, Kurosawa played a couple of perceptual tricks that undermine a smooth, linear dissemination of narrative information. A series of flashbacks are set out with particular pathos during a long montage as Watanabe recalls raising Mitsuo following the death of his wife (Prince, 103). A portrait of his wife, or his son's baseball bat, and objects or sound images full of memories are used to cue the flashbacks. In the montage, he interlinks the flashbacks and the realities with an extraordinary choreography of movement. Watanabe watches Mitsuo run around the bases and boasts to a man next to him, "That's my son." But when Mitsuo makes a mistake, Watanabe slowly sits down in the bleachers with disappointment and shame. This scene ends with a tilt-down camera movement, and immediately followed with a camera close-up on his desperate face in reality simultaneously with a tilt-up

movement. He cries “Mitsuo,” but it is nonsynchronous: audience can infer from his closed lips that the cry comes from his innermost feelings. Again, in the next flashback, Watanabe is standing beside his son in a descending elevator waiting for an appendectomy operation, but he can’t stay with his son. Back to reality, he looks up to the stairs, as the nonsynchronous cry “Mitsuo” sounds again. The transitions in between flashbacks and realities are connected smoothly and naturally that spectators could easily follow a logical train of thought for his emotional attachment with his son. Watanabe’s agony can be grasped throughout this sequence, scenes of trauma, failure, disappointment, and estrangement between father and son have petrified the past into a hardened fossil of what might have been (Prince, 106). Stephen Prince’s insightful cinematography analysis presented us a clear summary of the tactics Kurosawa utilized.

Several other details followed by the montage Kurosawa designed are also remarkable. When the protagonist returns to his room to make bed to sleep, it is noticeable that he spreads out his pants on the tatami under the futon. He is bitterly depicted that we can imagine how his life has been without his wife, all sacrificed for his son. His life had been all about his son. As usual, he tries to set the alarm clock for the next day’s work, suddenly he burst out into tears as he realize from the clock that he has only six months left. His attitude towards the elapsing time changed compare to how he looked at his pocket watch at work. This mummified bureaucrat starts to recollect the useless and unproductive memories in his last 25 years in the government. The close-up shot of the plaques on the wall seems to be satirizing his entire life. Watanabe lost his hope in looking for condolence from his son.

The second “straw” Watanabe turns to to find meaning in the last few months of life is the complete indulge in wine and women. There are a couple of beautiful and heartbreaking scenes worth mentioning in this part of the film. The shot of the Tokyo nightlife uses a lot of mirrors and reflecting surfaces to present the hallucination created by alcohol abuse. Yet, in Kurosawa’s mind, the meaning of life was not meant to reside in intoxication and indulgence of luxury and dissipation. The protagonist soon found it useless, he was left with vacancy and loneliness after a night of revelry. The song Watanabe sings twice in film apparently has some significant meaning to him. It is chose by the film not only for the fact that its lyrics have the ideology: “Life is short, cherish the time we have for now”, but also it was a hit song in the 20s, when Watanabe was still young and healthy. He must have sung this song cheerfully without tasting the sadness of *the* elapse of time. Thirty years later, when he looks back to his past in tears and sings the song once again, he realizes how much he had lost and begins to search for the new meaning of life. Surrounded by the cheerful dancers and other joyful customers, Watanabe’s eyes are still filled with despair. No one was able to share his pain. Even in the scenes depicting the nightclubs, Kurosawa’s use of background music is still limited. To Kurosawa, the music functioned as merely sound effects and a tool to emphasize the characters’ emotions in the film. He attempts to minimize the use of music in the production of *Ikiru*.

Toyo, a girl in his office, becomes his final straw. Watanabe apparently finds her energetic and joyous. He wants to share her happiness and hunger for life. However, the fact that he frequently meets with Toyo results in his son’s misunderstanding. Moreover, unable to make sense of Watanabe’s agony, Toyo no

longer agrees to go out with him again. He finally lost the final straw. Kurosawa uses a wide-angle camera frequently in the film. In the shot of them sitting in a fancy coffee shop, everyone has the same degree of sharpness that we can easily tell the girls across the stairs are having a birthday party. This is also the climax of the film: When Watanabe asked Toyo why she could live so lively everyday, Toyo replies that she wouldn't know why neither. The only things she does are work hard and eat well. It gives her strength and hope that she makes toy rabbits in the factory when imagines about playing with children all around Japan. Without intoxicating in revelry, not relying on others, Watanabe finally found his own meaningful way to live through his last days. When he grabs Toyo's toy rabbit and steps down the stairs, children sing the happy birthday song for the birthday girl. Obviously the birthday song is not for Watanabe, yet the song is indeed for him. It celebrates his rebirth, his brand-new life as a good municipal section chief. An interesting fact about the character setting for Toyo, who changes jobs from being a city hall worker to a factory worker is that this seems to reflect Kurosawa's sympathy for communist thought at the time. In addition, Toyo's attitude towards the civil servant career perfectly expresses Kurosawa's hatred towards the stagnant government.

A line in Ozu Yasujirō (1903-63)'s last film, *An Autumn Afternoon* (*Samma no Aji*, 1962), is proved tenable here: "All men are alone" (Ozu). Watanabe lost grip on the three straws. Parents, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives and friends are merely transient guests and companions of individuals' lives. To Kurosawa, it is usually useless to put one's hope for a sense of meaning in life on other individuals. This is because human beings are often unable to apprehend and share

other individual's pain. He maintains that people selfishly focus on their own concerns and ignore others, even their closest relatives. Watanabe realized that there's no one that he could rely on. He has to take the responsibility for himself. Finally, Watanabe sweat his own healing toad oil by losing grip on three final straws; he has graduated from the university of life. In the rest of the film, Watanabe proves to us that even a nearly lifeless individual contains the potential for change and action as long as he is alive.

Although this is a film of a dying man, Kurosawa seldom makes us feel sentimental about his death. The voice-over at the beginning was so detached from the protagonist's destiny that even made the spectators feel a sense of ridicule. The director made his death so unexpected even though we are aware of his death from the beginning of film. As we raised our expectations to see in the next scene that he exert himself to do some "real things" for the slum residents, we unexpectedly see his death.

From here on, the voice-over disappears. The spectators could only know about the protagonist's last five months' of life from the conversations of his colleagues and bosses. After accompanying him by his side for mostly two thirds of the film (Watanabe disappears from the spectator's view a couple of times), from this point on we have no way but to observe him as a bystander.

There are three visual motifs that are repeated and varied through out the film to suggest Watanabe's transformation: the hat, the clock and the toy rabbit. All of them appear at Watanabe's funeral. The toy rabbit and the alarm clock are put together in the same box, and a policeman returns the hat. The three things are footprints of Watanabe's evolution.

Watanabe bought the hat on the night he got drunk with the writer. His old-fashioned black hat was replaced by the new style light-colored hat, which signified the abrupt change of his quiet life. The new hat appeared frequently in the film as an important motif. Everyone around Watanabe was surprised by it. In the second part of the film at Watanabe's funeral, the policeman returns to the relatives the hat Watanabe left in the children's park right before his death and draws an end to the story. The hat covered with dirt symbolizes his last moment. His son regretfully sheds tears on the hat, indifference to his father in this scene. As James Goodwin notes, "In its scenes concerning the office worker Toyo and Watanabe's son Mitsuo, *Ikiru* also finds that the younger generation's absorption in material life has made them indifferent to suffering and ungrateful for the sacrifices of their parents" (Goodwin,104). While successfully *emphasizing* the theme of searching for the meaning of life, Kurosawa carefully conveys the subthemes and depicts a panoramic view of the post-war social predicaments.

The second visual motif is the toy rabbit. Toyo shows the toy rabbit she made in the factory in the fancy coffee shop to the confused Watanabe. Staring at the toy rabbit, Watanabe suddenly realized that he has to do something in order to leave no regrets for his life. He wants to leave the world something memorable. The rabbit here signifies his enlightenment of how to live the rest of his life.

The last visual motif is the alarm clock. Naturally, the clock symbolizes the time. The clock appears in several parts of the film, Watanabe's attitude towards time completely changes as the film progresses. As stated in the earlier part of the thesis that Watanabe first looks at the clock impatiently before he knows about his

impending death date, then he fears to look at the clock after he went to the hospital. In the end, we see from Watanabe's colleagues' flashback that he repeatedly says that he has not enough time.

In the second half of the film at Watanabe's wake, the Vice Mayor was questioned by the journalists about Watanabe's death. Embarrassed by the journalists, the Vice Mayor makes a speech about the function of the bureaucracy that implies that Watanabe is not the main instigator of the park, and he then decides to leave. Everyone in the funeral bows to see him off except for Sakai. Sakai insists that it is Watanabe who overcome the inertia of bureaucracy through persistent efforts to turn the mosquito-infested cesspool into a children's park. Although they disagreed with Sakai's opinion, people wonder about what caused such a dramatic change in Watanabe. They soon realized, as they gradually got drunk, that Watanabe's transformation from a listless bureaucrat to a passionate fighter was because he must have known about his impending death. They drunkenly vow to live their lives with the same dedication as passionate and productive as Watanabe did. But in the next morning back at work, they lack the courage of the newfound conviction. Facing the citizens' new complaints, even Sakai sits back down when gazed at by his colleagues. Watanabe's hat was not handed down to anyone. No one is wearing it. No one has the capability and courage to wear it. In other words, Watanabe's spirit was not succeeded by anyone. Kurosawa's meticulous attention to details is not very common in male directors. The last scene that depicts Watanabe's colleagues back at work after the wake is essentially important in educating the audience. It admonishes the audience about human's short memory. Kurosawa has expected the worst. He knows that his

audience might made up their minds to live a new life watching the film in the movie theatre but turn back to who they were in the next day. He strives to help the audience to be reborn, even if it is only a day or two.

The office scene is especially remarkable in this film. During Watanabe's absence, the civil servants in the city hall are talking profusely about the reason of his absence. The composition of each conversation shot underlines the sense of isolation in people. A pile of documents or a pillar was always put in purposefully to separate the participants in the conversations. Kurosawa deliberately extends the distances between them to imply their covert rivalry with each other.

Kurosawa could be cruel. During the early post-war period as a Marxist, he had a ferocious hatred for the moribund Japanese capitalist society and the false consciousness of the Japanese people. He was not afraid of revealing the despicable aspects of Japanese bureaucrats to the world, and he strove to motivate passive bureaucrats and citizens to transform their society. Many postwar films put his protagonists in a grave situation, in which they feel powerless and fall into painful introspection. Yet, Kurosawa is also merciful to his protagonists because he never ends a film without hope and always provides a way out for his characters. In *Stray Dog*, Murakami finally finds his pistol and catches the criminal; in *Drunken Angel*, the doctor cures the schoolgirl; even in *Rashomon* (*Rashomon* 1950), the monk revives his faith in humanity. We could say Kurosawa never stopped pondering about his death, and *Ikiru* was "toad oil" produced by his meditations. A film like *Ikiru*, functions like mirror box for the toad. Spectators are shocked and start to ponder the meaning of life

for themselves. Kurosawa hoped to make his audience sweat some toad oil out of his films, and his films do seek to offer the audience some kind of cure.

## PART II: VILLON'S WIFE

### BACKGROUND

By contrast to Kurosawa Akira's search for sources of transformative energy in postwar society, Negishi Kichitarō (1950)'s *Villon's Wife* may be viewed as a eulogy to the post-war new women who emerged after the end of the war. Dissimilar to *Ikiru* in genre, *Villon's Wife* conveniently falls into the category of "melodrama." In film scholar Ben Singer's book *Melodrama and Modernity*, he gives a popular definition of melodramas: "Melodrama as it generally is used today refers to a set of subgenres that remain close to the heart and hearth and emphasize a register of heightened emotionalism and sentimentality" (37). Because of these characteristics and their topicality, among the innumerable brilliant films the Japanese directors produced, melodramas gained much attention from the critics. Just as is the case with postwar history, the history of post-war melodramas can also be conveniently divided into several chapters. As Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano tells us, melodramas gained favorable reputations in the popular media from the end of the 1940s to the mid-1950s. The production of melodramas soon declined as the economic conditions improved and the demand for national narrative became no longer crucial from 1960s on. In the recent twenty years, melodramas returned to the sight of public with new vitality. The new spirit and vigor infused into *Villon's Wife* by Negishi Kichitarō in this day and age offers much for us to study.

Unlike the female images created by Dazai Osamu in his original novel, Negishi's women characters are not linked to defeatist and nihilistic sentimentalities. In addition to overcoming the defeatist tone in *Villon's Wife*, left by Dazai Osamu, Negishi nearly 60 years later blends elements and conceptions to suggest the spirit of new era amidst 1940's post-war nihilism. He recreates the original novel with a refreshing new sense, offering a unique new reading of the classic. With the director's well-prepared details, the audience is able to sense the strong courage and resilience in the female protagonist, which is quite different from the female image Dazai Osamu created in his other works. Negishi stresses the resilience and courage of women who suffered in the post-war period, presenting to the present-day audience a story of the evolution of a new woman.

Also, if we heed Wada-Marciano's claim, "as long as the nation-state exists, the national narrative is reiterated", it is not difficult to understand the director's intention to depict Dazai Osamu's female protagonist in a different way. It is noteworthy that the film might also be regarded as a revival of 1950s hahamono or "mother films", if we consider its subject matter. Negishi's reworking of the female protagonist in Dazai Osamu's original work, if seen as the "mother subject" of the "national narrative," might be seen as an attempt to provide viewers with some new spirit and strength in the period of today's endless economic downturn. As women viewers watch the female protagonist who oscillates and struggles between being a the "lacking subject" and "modern subject", they might be encouraged to turn to self-reflection and to reconsider about their social roles and objectives.<sup>1</sup> We are going to

explore closely the cinematography, plot, and history of the film in the following passages.

## FILM ANALYSIS

### **A Sincere Dandelion, *Villon's wife***

2009 was the centennial year of the famous suicidal writer Dazai Osamu's birthday. The film *Villon's Wife: Cherry and Dandelion* was made to celebrate his birth in the same *centennial* year. According to Negishi's ironic comment, the idea is commonly accepted that Dazai's death is worth more commemoration than his birth. The tale *Villon's Wife* was therefore carefully chosen from Dazai's collections to commemorate his birth. Unlike most of Dazai's works that are colored with his suicidal mentality, *Villon's Wife* gives the readers the "hope to stay alive." In the film, the director Negishi Kichitaro seeks to present us with a brand-new interpretation of this famous short story. As a male director, he tries to construct this story, which featured a woman first-person narrator in Dazai's version, in a more gender balanced, multifaceted way. For example, although Negishi tries to maintain the female viewpoint of the original novel, he also does not give up portraying the male character's side of the story. Thus, in analyzing the film, we may first dichotomize it into two parts, the male voice and female voice. By considering the perspectives of the female protagonist and male protagonist we will take up the original book, together with Seki Reiko's criticism, to explore the film's text and the context, the

cinematography implemented by the director, and the theme of the film in term of the social-economical conditions of the period.

***Female Voice (the truthful dandelion)***

Transformation is the theme pursued by the female voice in the film. In the film, the female protagonist is always in the process of changing. She utilizes her life skills to conquer all the problems she faces, and grows through this process. The director strives to present the protagonist in a way more accessible to the contemporary Japanese female audience, altering the image created in the original novel.

For example, in the first twenty-two minutes of the film, the female protagonist exists only as Otani's wife. The audience may not realize that her name has never been spoken aloud until she starts working in the restaurant. The first day of work, when someone inquires about her name, she asks the guests to call her "Tubakiya's Sachi". Here is the first significant transformation for the female protagonist. Her personal identity changes from someone's wife to that of a free standing individual. This symbolizes her first move to become an independent woman. After Sachi starts working in Tsubakiya, her life-style also changes. Instead of staying at home waiting passively for her husband to bring her happiness, she understands that she is able to actively obtain her happiness by working. Not only is she able, for the first time to make money, from her work in Tsubakiya, for the family's living and medical expenses, but also she can meet her husband more often in the restaurant than when she stays at home. Compared to her life staying at home, Sachi is lighthearted and gay when she is working. She even says "I feel happy" to Otani when he walks home with her after work.

The second significant transformation for Sachi comes after second half of the film when Otani and Aki are saved from the suicide. When Sachi visits Otani in the prison, for the first time, instead of using *Keigo* (honorific form of speaking), she speaks in casual form to her husband. Sachi gives the audience a sense of aloofness because of her meticulous proper manners (she always speaks in *Keigo* and faces crisis with composure when she is facing other people) in the former scenes. However, when she finds out about her husband's suicide with his lover, she can't remain silent. She realizes there hadn't been any love from Otani for her from the beginning. Although loathing her weak and irresponsible husband, she still decides to have sex with the lawyer in order to pay for the lawyer's fee to save her husband. The transformation here is two-sided. On one hand, the transformation is encouraging. As a powerless housewife, Sachi became someone powerful enough to rescue her husband by using her body. On the other hand, the transformation is ugly because Sachi's power is gained by trading her body. The director implies the ugliness of the transformation by showing her twisted face applying lipstick, bought from the *panpan* girls, reflected on a golden plaque in front of the law firm. The action of applying the lipstick signifies her transformation from a "truthful dandelion" to a mode of sophistication and evil. Yet she appears helpless before the forces that require her to change her moral standard. The film ends with the scene where Sachi utters the famous line from Dazai: "There is nothing wrong with being a monster, is there? As long as we can stay alive." Suddenly, the director screens out the noise of the busy streets, to highlight the conversation between the two protagonists. In isolation, Sachi and Otani become the

center of the universe. The audience is drawn into the sensations in the world of the characters, as if the director is using a time machine.

We can easily realize the difference between the original novel and the film. Negishi deliberately deleted some of the original contents and added some of his own interpretations to accentuate Sachi's evolution. In the film, Sachi is able to choose what she wants to do instead of passively resigned to her fate. Instead of being raped by the customer in the restaurant, she is adored and proposed to by a cute young customer. The action of rescuing her husband was added to substantiate the evidence that Sachi is able to control her own life. In Negishi Kichitaro's *Villon's Wife*, Sachi is depicted as an independent, powerful, and courageous woman characters who outstrips the male characters. Her resilient character leaves a strong impression on the audience's memory.

### ***Male Voice (the fragile cherry)***

The themes presented by the male voice prevalent in the film are those of fear and sin. As argued by Seki Reiko, in her essay *No longer human, a male voice story*, a way of reading that separates Dazai Osamu from his I-novels doesn't exist in contemporary Japan. Consequently, the male protagonist Otani can be considered as another Dazai Osamu, living in the fictional world he has created. Seki suggested it is nearly impossible to study the ideology of Dazai's male protagonist without relating it to the author of the novel. This is also true when we consider examining a film adaptation of Dazai Osamu's I-fiction.

Thus, despite the way Negishi transforms Dazai's original text, his film makes allusions to the historical Dazai. Otani's fear can be seen everywhere in the film. In the first flashback scene of the film, we follow Otani Joji through his childhood experiences. The director deliberately shoots this flashback scene in black and white to make a distinction between the past and the present. Otani's aunt asked him to turn the wheel of a well forwards, saying that if the wheel turns backwards after it stops turning forwards, the wheel turner will go to hell after death. After two failed attempts, fear starts to appear on young Otani's face. At the same time, the camera moves up vertically and tilts down to his face, creating a point of view shot as if it is a god looking down on a human being. The lifted shot angle enhances the character's terror. Here the director buries a hint of fear that foreshadows later developments in the plot.

Otani told Sachi about his fear several times in the film. The first time, he mentions his fearful feeling in a conversation with Sachi on their way home after she gets off from work. He talks about the god in his childhood memory and his dreadful feeling of being incompatible with the society. The second time, the drunken Otani returns home shouting, "I'm afraid" desperately to Sachi, and has sex with her. "What is he afraid of? Where does his anxiety come from?" the audience may wonder. In reality, Otani's anxieties do not only come from society, but comes from the fear that god will punish his sins sooner or later. These are the first intimations of his fear. The second perspective of his fear grows from his apprehension about shouldering the responsibilities of love, and being loved. As presented in many details of the film, Otani constantly shirks his family obligations. He was afraid that everything would vanish if he believed in love. Dazai Osamu described himself in *No Longer Human*,

“A coward is afraid of happiness, he could even be hurt by a piece of cotton”. (223) Otani is incapable of accepting love from others, just as he is unable to stay alive. He might love Sachi from the bottom of heart but he was too afraid to show it. Although Otani cares about his wife, he was too intimidated to admit it. He could only stalk her to investigate about her affair. He had the fear that he will lose everything once he becomes straightforward and honest. The director subtly describes Otani’s jealousy, making Dazai’s unique buffoonery spirit incisive and vivid for the audience. Otani’s inner conflict is expressed in his contradictory acts. He begs for love from others, at the same time he isolates himself from the love.

Dazai Osamu reflected on the Bible and Christianity into the novel by incorporating his cosmology into the Otani’s character. The director, too, openly shows Dazai’s Christianity in the plot. The act that Otani returns the robbed money to the restaurant on Christmas Eve symbolizes the redemption of Otani’s soul and the salvation of Sachi. Sin and crime are also important themes of the film. The seven cardinal sins, “wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony” can all be found in the self-centered protagonist Otani. In addition, everyone in the film seems to have been convicted of some type of crimes, or has some secrets not to be divulged: Otani robs the restaurant, the lawyer takes advantage of Sachi when she is in trouble, the restaurant boss sells black market sake, even the innocent Sachi had been caught of shop-lifting before. The director reveals the secret sins of the characters indirectly by frequently shooting them from the side. In the composition of shots, the director often place grids and doorframes in front of the characters, which successfully creates for the audience a sense of peering into their unspeakable sins.

The director deliberately differentiates the film from the original novel in several other ways. Negishi seems to feel he is responsible for engraving Dazai Osamu's name on the film by adding a suicide scene. Otani commits suicide with his lover Aki, and is saved by the police afterwards. Shame is the main reason for his suicide, an idea frequently mentioned in Dazai's other novels. In the original *Villon's Wife*, a customer from the restaurant follows Sachi home after her shift and rapes her. In the film, Negishi replaces it with a scene that Sachi voluntarily trades her body for the lawyer's defense fee. In this way, by emphasizing Sachi's ability to choose and act on her free will, Negishi presents women in contemporary society as having more reasonable options for staying alive. He hopes to ensure the audience's comprehension by turning the story into a modern adaptation of the original.

Hirano Ken, in his essay "Antinomies of the I-novel", categorized the post-war I-novels into two types, the "disillusion type" and the "harmony type". While the "disillusion type" I-novel strives to present a sense of crisis through the delineation of the protagonist, the "harmony type" I-novel emphasizes the protagonist's peaceful state of mind, obtained after the process of overcoming and transcending the crisis. In terms of his life experience, inner mentality and writing style, Dazai Osamu would appear to be typical "disillusion type" I-novelist. However, *Villon's Wife*, as one of his novels presented through a female narrator, displayed characteristics different from the "disillusion type" I-novel. The story is actually closer to the "harmony type" I-novels, in the sense that it provides a solution, a way out to the problems of the chaotic

post-war Japanese society. In other words, instead of death, the hope of staying alive was what the author wants to pass on to the audience.

In his film, director Negishi has chosen a work atypical of Dazai in attempting to show the audience as much as he can within limited time and story frame. It seems Negishi wants to preserve Dazai's nihilistic viewpoint, yet at the same time endow the original novel with refreshing vitality that will enable it to survive in the new era. However, Negishi's ambitious attempt results in a failure to tell the meaning of the story in a more comprehensible way. Still the film is most effective in its attempts to provide as an entry to Dazai's literature for the contemporary female audience. Negishi utilizes typical audience friendly Hollywood cinematography in the film to ensure the audience's understanding, which is crucial as an introductory film to Dazai's literature. His adaptation is innovative yet traditional, commercial yet artistic. With its progressive views of women's ability to transform their lives highly praised by feminism critics, the film is being seen as a new page of Japanese film history.

## CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, both *Ikiru* and *Villon's Wife*, attempt to convey the actuality of postwar social conditions. The mosquito-infested cesspool and the underperformance of the government in *Ikiru*, as well the *panpan* girls and black market transactions in *Villon's Wife* are truthful reflections of Japan's social conditions in the first decade after the defeat. The directors' and author's worldviews, together with the post-war conditions, are reflected, refracted and bent in the space of the films so that their multifaceted surfaces display a pleasing reflection for the audience. Looking back from today, Kurosawa's production of *Ikiru* can be interpreted as an attempt to heal the nation and the populace from the hell of defeat. *Villon's Wife* was produced as the harmony type of I-novel films, suggesting the complex paradox of Dazai Osamu's nihilistic ideology and his "hope of staying alive". The creation of the female protagonist is a remarkable breakthrough from the frame of female archetype set by the author, which provides a new reading of the classic.

By studying and comparing two of the post-war melodramas, we have a better understanding of the post-war films, ideologies, and social-economical conditions. The cinematography, plot and script of both are constructed in such a way that both appeal to their audience with unique characteristics and charm. Both showcase the protagonists' mettle and steely determination to get through ordeals unscathed and with dignity, celebrating self-reliance and survival instincts during times of hardship. Thanks to Kurosawa and Negishi, we are able to watch these brilliant films about the

post-war period. The two directors and their films will be remembered in the history of films because of their successful efforts to capture the postwar spirit in which introspection, and the will to survive, existed side by side.

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## NOTE

1. In Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano's *The Postwar Japanese Melodrama*, she bases her argument on the hypothesis that postwar cultural agents in Japan sought "modern subjectivity" amid the atmosphere of political and economical crisis and forged it in their cultural expressions. The most general explanation of "lacking subject" is described by film scholar Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto as one "that does not act according to its own will but acts following something or someone." Two polarized notions of the "lacking subject" and "modern subject" are paralleled as the opposition between the West and Japan, melodramatic and nonmelodramatic.