

Death and Desire in Contemporary Japan

Representing, Practicing, Performing

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Portraits of Desire in Blue

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Abstract The fear of Death and the Desire to transcend mortality are themes that have recurred so often in film history: therefore, their link with cinema is worthy of attention. If many films have been portrayed as a meditation on human mortality, some seem to suggest confronting Death openly for greater personal growth and improving one's own existence. *Rokugatsu no hebi*, directed by Tsukamoto Shin'ya, may be supposed to be among these. The film tells a sensual and violent story of salvation through the reawakening of Desire and the repossession of the body in the modern metropolis, against the depersonalisation, crushing, and virtual tension of contemporary life. It also provides occasion for an interesting analysis of Desire and its position toward the crux of Death in the key of psychoanalytic interpretation developed by Jacques Lacan, substantially based on its vision. Hence, a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to the filmic text seems to be appropriate to the purpose and helps to bring to the surface the portraits of desire that inhabit it, thematically as well as in its staging. Director Tsukamoto appears to be very skilful on staging mental landscapes and psychological tension, which is the ground of the unconscious whereby Lacanian Desire finds itself perfectly at home.

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Rokugatsu no hebi (A Snake of June, 2002) directed by Tsukamoto Shin'ya is one of those films that deal with the crucial questions of the finiteness of the human being, the fragility and mortality of our bodies, and the psychological and philosophical quandary posed by Death, in close relation with the significance every human being gives to her or his own life.

According to Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg (2013), the fear of Death and the desire to transcend mortality are themes that have recurred so often in different genres, eras, and nations in film history as

to suggest that the association between Death and cinema is worthy of attention.¹

If many films have been portraying a meditation on human mortality, some seem to suggest to the spectator the most productive position to take before this decisive point in existence, i.e. confronting Death openly for greater personal growth and improving one's own existence. As I will try to point out in this paper, I believe *Rokugatsu no hebi* to be one of these. Death is the film's co-star, and the ways in which the issue of mortality moulds its characters and narrative are well worth examining.

In this volume, our research deals with Death and Desire and I believe the film also provides occasion for an interesting analysis of Desire and its position with regard to the crux of Death in the key of Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation. In fact, the lesson on Desire offered by Jacques Lacan (1975) appears to wield great relevance not only to psychoanalysis but also to understand the more general anthropological and social imprint of our times, and may therefore be justifiably applied to the analysis of filmic text as well.

Gabbard (2001) observes that the semiotic theories of spectatorship have spawned a greater awareness of the interplay between a film and its audience and a good deal of recent psychoanalytic film criticism is based on the notion that specific assumptions in the spectator interact with the visual aspects of a film and its narrative to illuminate particular psychoanalytically informed meanings. My study seems to be emblematic of this approach, because the dense layering of *Rokugatsu no hebi* arouses my *desire* to strip away every layer and penetrate its complexity.

I believe that Shin'ya Tsukamoto is one of the most interesting auteurs (considering his total involvement in the production of the filmic work) of our times, and that he can effectively contribute to the debate on those human existential issues.²

I dedicated my research to director Tsukamoto and his work since the beginning of the last decade,³ deepening the specificity both of productive and social environment in which he operates and also comparing myself to the main studies about that context, both European and American (among

1 Psychological and philosophical perspectives suggest this is a unifying concept that might prove useful in analysing film works because the question of Death and human psychological response to it contribute to the possibilities open to cinematography, while films contribute to the discussion of these crucial concerns in their own way (Greenberg, Sullivan 2013).

2 For its depth and complexity, the work of the director Tsukamoto has recently awakened the scholars' interest also in the field of the film philosophy theories; I find intriguing the essay on the materiality of mourning in *Vital* (2004) proposed by Havi Carel (2011).

3 Since then, the director has also granted me several meetings, both in Japan and at Venice International Film Festival: more specifically, a long conversation (unpublished) in Tokyo, on 5th December 2003, which was essential for my past and present studies. Once again, special thanks to Director Tsukamoto for taking the time to answer my questions about his work.

others, Brown 2010; McRoy 2005; Martin 2015) as well as in Japanese language (Tanaka 2003; Kobayashi 2010); context from which, however, I will distance in this paper.

In this study I intend to prove that director Tsukamoto can tell us something interesting about Death and Desire in his own peculiar way, and I will do it through the textual analysis of *Rokugatsu no hebi*, making a creative use of the instrument of inferred script/découpage (Burch 1980; Bruni 2006) to read it in a Lacanian key.

My interpretation is to be considered very personal and based substantially on the vision and analytical transcription of the filmic text, in the perspective of the psychoanalytic concept of the Desire postulate by Lacan.⁴ A Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to it would, in fact, be appropriate to my purpose and would help bring to the surface the portraits of desire that inhabit it, both thematically and in its staging. I will also fit concepts borrowed from other various disciplines to the objects of my investigation, be they from linguistic, philosophy, sociology, or semiotics.

In particular, I will take advantage of the methodological aid offered by studies on the philosophy of language about figuration (Volli 2002) and on the paradigms of desire elaborated by Lacan (Recalcati 2012); studies that deal precisely with the identification of those portraits of desire into modern society. I will try to demonstrate how Tsukamotian portraits in blue match and meet those postulates of desire and confront the crux of death.

In my textual analysis, I will also show that the existential issues tackled by the narrative are echoed by the form of the film and by Tsukamoto's aesthetic choices as well.

Rokugatsu no hebi provides an intriguing figuration of the power of the desire's drive, through the unique idea of an act of perversion hatched by a molester. We will see that, despite the perverted idea, director Tsukamoto's aim is not to shock but to offer an intense meditation on the embodied nature of desire. Similar acts of perversion became tropes in some horror or pornographic films but, as I will try to point out in my analysis, the film aesthetic and emotional tension towards empathy⁵ manages this issue in a very different manner.

The relationship with death is a central concern for the protagonists

4 As Bellavita (2006) points out, thinking of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical discipline means querying the text directly and the medium of psychoanalysis of cinema is nothing but cinematographic language. In this perspective, the application of the Lacanian discipline to the film text has to analyse the language of cinema and its use, i.e. the process of enunciation.

5 During our conversation (unpublished), answering my questions, director Tsukamoto told me: "In the first part of the film, the protagonist Rinko is harassed and tormented by a stalker. But, actually, during the shooting I felt sorry for her. So, I started thinking that I would have liked her to be happy" (Tokyo, 5 December 2003).

who, constantly tottering between life and death, seem to choose to run voluntarily into its arms. But the director, by systematically overturning the taboos of voyeurism, violence and disease, intends to open a breach in the prison of the inorganic (infiltrating, like the rain that seeps unfailingly into every crack in the cement) and, thanks to an act of perversion, sweeping away every moral judgment, forces the pair of protagonists to regain a satisfying life and find fulfilment and happiness. In conclusion, Tsukamoto seems to be telling the viewer that it is through the expression of desire (recovering our own body) that the drive towards exhaustion and the inorganic (death) can be opposed most profitably.

As I hope it will be clear, the body – and its face – will be the paradigmatic sign of those portraits of desire; they will guide us, and I believe they could be the key tool for further investigations on director Tsukamoto's work.

1 Mental Landscapes

I consider Tsukamoto as a master of staging mental landscapes and psychological tension, and the terrain of the unconscious in which Lacanian desire finds itself perfectly at home.⁶

Throughout his filmography, Tsukamoto has shown his skill at giving shape to precise mental landscapes⁷ and staging the most hidden inner impulses that rattle and change/mutate human bodies. The structure of *Rokugatsu no hebi* is essential and rigorous: each element is an indispensable piece in the creation of a stylised mosaic, a thriller starring desire.

The story turns around three main characters rendering the primary shape of a triangle composed of two men – Iguchi Michio, the stalker photographer, Tatsumi Shigehiko and his young wife, Tatsumi Rinko, at the apex. A limited number of actors, enclosed places, condensed duration, and precise stylistic choices contribute to the making of an original authorial perspective. Attendant to his own *desire* for cinema, as usual, Tsukamoto is not only the director but also the author of a linear and fluid script (never more clearly resolved in his previous work than here), of a precise editing driven by introspection, the photography – in an inspired b/w toned to

6 For Volli (2002), the fundamental figure in the investigation of desire – according to the well-known contemporary theory of Desire proposed by Lacan (1975) in which “every desire is a desire for the Other” – is the body, the *physical* nature of desire. This seems particularly pertinent to the staging of Tsukamoto's bodies throbbing with desire.

7 As regards this talent of his, the director finds cinematic expressive medium to be a particularly appropriate tool, because the fictional film has the strange power of reconciling three extremely different levels of consciousness for a moment: the impression of reality, the impression of dream, and the impression of fantasy, which cease to be contradictory and mutually exclusive and establish new relationships (cf. Metz 1989, 130).

blue – and the choice of using 1.37:1 aspect ratio for the frame, which is almost square and cut around a single body. He also personally takes charge of the sound and noise register, which he uses methodically to accompany his mental landscapes in blue. In a very intriguing way, the reawakening of desire shows an aural nature, paralleled by a skilful aural cinematic technique. Obviously, then, he cannot help getting in front of the camera, saving the role of the perverse molester for himself, the man who spins the other two into motion, in this way also doubling his role as director.

The characters are precise ‘portraits of desire’ (an expression borrowed from Recalcati 2012) and the film itself – from a Lacanian point of view – is a portrait of the desire of Tsukamoto, the director. Namely, his desire for cinema as the preferred vehicle for his rebellious, uninhibited and passionate, erotic and violent expression, his desire for the spectator, his desire for an Elsewhere,⁸ after overcoming the limits of mortality through cinematographic artistic expression.

The film tells a sensual and violent story of salvation through the reawakening of desire and the repossession of the body – an erotic body⁹ – in the modern city of steel, glass and concrete, the Tokyo Metropolis, the great antagonist that crushes the bodies and confines the minds of the characters of Tsukamoto’s filmography.¹⁰

June’s monsoon rains never stop pouring in the metropolis; the rain flows thick and fast into every crevice, pushing forward into the heavy manholes in the asphalt; it slides down every window, soaks clothing and drenches bodies, contaminates and fertilises every image as if in a state of permanent erotic arousal, deliberately permeating the b/w photography with blue. Water – along with earth, air and fire – is a fundamental element in the imaginary experience: the use of the colour blue itself is ably combined with the sound effects, and the unceasing pounding of the rain – also with interventions of extradiegetic nature in the modulation of the volume – suggests the surrealist nature of the setting,¹¹ its dreamlike/internal nature of mental landscape.

8 According to Recalcati: “desire as an opening in the direction of Elsewhere, as transcendence, as invocation of another possibility than mere presence of the existent” (2012, 90). Moreover, “desire is based not on the existence of the Object but a subjective decision. Just what am I going to do with my desire? How will I be able to make it fruitful, not wasteful? I do not think it at all insignificant that Lacan proposed translating the German term with which Freud defines desire (Wunsch) into the French term *Voeu*, vow, vocation, invocation” (91). In this regard, it is interesting that Tsukamoto chose *Kyrie eleison* – invocation expression – to accompany the key sequence of the couple’s final embrace.

9 Because Recalcati (2012) asserts that life needs enjoyment (i.e. the physical pleasure), and the human body is structurally an erotic body.

10 For further discussion on the theme of Tokyo Metropolis in the films of Tsukamoto, see Cimalando 2010.

11 The iconography of interior space is composed of surrealist images, which are an integral part of Tsukamotian poetics.

2 *Rokugatsu no hebi*. Coordinates for Viewing in the Sign of Desire

2.1 The Photographer and the Help Line Operator

In the opening sequence, a photo shoot for soft porn magazines, there are close-ups of a camera with a big objective lens, the flash of the bulbs and a female body, combined with the feverish sound of the shutters and the young girl's sighs. Then, there is a cut to close-ups of the erotic photos taken, laid on the editor's desk alongside others picturing commercial objects for advertising. Contemporary society – the society of pleasure and enjoyment as an end in itself – avidly consumes images of the erotic body (female) and craves the possession of objects in an induced way, such as the advertising shots of items on sale. Here is precisely portrayed character Iguchi's chosen profession.

The photographer is alone in his studio. A phone call starts and the voice of an operator (character Rinko) at a mental health help line is heard in reply. Close-up of the telephone (a fetish object).¹² After some hesitation, Iguchi communicates his intention to take his own life.

After the opening credits, here is the close-up of a slimy snail (organic) sliding slowly over the surface of a big hydrangea leaf wet with rain (fig. 1), followed instantly in reverse shot by a cold framing of Tokyo Metropolis with its steel, glass, and cement buildings (inorganic), soaked in the blue of the driving rain (fig. 2). These are the film's two pivotal metaphorical images rich in meaning that return again and again in a circular narration scheme (just as the circularity of Lacanian Desire) featuring repetition. The first is the portrait of the awakening of desire, and it is staged in contrast with the second, which is the portrait of the great antagonist to the desiring humans of Tsukamoto's filmography; the desire of the body (and the mind) against the depersonalisation, crushing, and virtual tension of life in the big metropolis.

At the mental health centre, the operator Rinko is at her desk, wearing headset and microphone, gentle and attentive in her conversation with her invisible caller (who is bypassed by the phone). Outside, June's torrential monsoon rain continues flowing relentlessly into the concrete city's iron manholes.

¹² The telephone object, during the film, becomes a fetish object through which all the interrelations between the characters pass. Rinko and Iguchi on the help line, Iguchi who sends a mobile phone to Rinko for the purpose of calling and directing her, and then Rinko who calls Iguchi with the same virtual prosthesis, Iguchi who calls Shigehiko, Shigehiko, who after finding refuge in his favourite café, talks over the phone instead of arranging his mother's funeral personally.



Figure 1



Figure 2

2.2 A Couple Lifestyle in an Elegant Sterile Apartment

A man (character Shigehiko) with the sleeves of his spotless white shirt rolled up well is cleaning the bathroom sink frantically, scrubbing hard, but without using water. When his wife, Rinko, returns to their elegant and tidy apartment she starts a conversation, but it is more of a monologue; he is too involved in what he is doing. She has brought home some take-away food for herself; he has already eaten. They do not share pleasure, not even the intimacy of a family meal.¹³

The woman immediately feels to blame herself: if the bathroom was dirty, she should have been the one to clean it (assuming the precise role society assigned her). Her husband, a mature man with a good job, tells her that he likes doing it. A dialogue follows between the two from different rooms, both intent on their own doings. She would like a pet. He disagrees entirely (he is, in fact, horrified at the idea) and asks her in a scolding tone to keep her books scattered around in better order. Here are portrayed Shigehiko's neurosis: the need to control everything, the need to be aseptic, Lacan's cloistering.

Rinko has fallen asleep with the light on. As she does not feel him in the bed, she gets up and takes a blanket, knowing where to find him (habit); he sleeps on the *chaise longue* (the quintessential design object) in the study. The young woman tenderly gazes at her husband and lovingly covers him up. Then driven by her desire, she steps into the closet and rummages

¹³ In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argues that lifestyles are technical answers, finalised to the problem posed by pleasure, and methods that are more or less effective in coming to terms with happiness' impossibility (cf. Freud 1978, 557-630). This concept is well exemplified in the couple's lifestyle, until Iguchi's action brings them into contact with their desire.



Figure 3



Figure 4

among Shigehiko's clothes searching for something to take to bed in order to luxuriate in his smell and make up for his absence.

Portrait of desire in blue (fig. 3): Rinko immersed in the bathtub stares intensely at the rain falling outside onto the round skylight pane above her – only its shadows penetrates the room –, the face soaked in sweat. Close-up of her gaze looking into the distance (fig. 4), lost in her desire (for the Other).

2.3 A Cruel Game

Then Rinko receives an envelope in the mail with the words (in Roman characters) "*Danna no himitsu*" (your husband's secret). Here's the start of a perverse game.

Close-ups of photographs taken out of the mysterious envelope: her face, her body, and her solitary masturbation, reproduced by the nervous way she flips those pictures through her fingers faster and faster (fig. 5). Her autoeroticism is not filmed or shown by the camera but performed by the movement of her hands flipping through the photos. This interesting operation of *mise en abyme* of Rinko's erotic body is a key sequence, one of the film's climaxes, and a meta-cinematographic example in which the very mechanism of the rolling of the film frame itself is revealed to us (no longer 24 frames per second but at manual speed). Those pictures have been taken from outside, through windows panes, through the round skylight. We cannot help but feel estrangement, perceive the unreality of the point of view, the vanishing point outside the frame – extradiegetic – possibly in coincidence with the viewpoint of the spectator and the position of the camera. In other words, the point of view of the director, reinforcing the operation of identification and doubling of Tsukamoto as director (operating outside the film frame) and Tsukamoto as character Iguchi (acting



Figure 5



Figure 6

from inside), and the overlap of the film's project with the plan concocted by the stalker.

At her job, Rinko receives another phone call from the other day's caller (the photographer Iguchi): he no longer wants to kill himself because he has found an objective to pursue, and this is something that should make her happy.¹⁴

As a good wife should, Rinko assists her elderly mother-in-law at the hospital instead of her husband, who simply ignores the problem by glibly blaming work commitments. Old age and illness are enclosed in the perfectly aseptic walls of society's designated place with the effect of removal.

2.4 Pictures and the Voice of a Stalker

The young wife receives another envelope. The rain's roaring pervades every frame. New pictures show her shortening one of her skirts with a sharp cut of the scissors, then putting it on and carefully applying makeup, her face gazing intently at herself in the mirror (a Lacanian mirror, in which a human being has the first fundamental experience of self-recognition). A mobile phone rings shrilly from inside the envelope. The stalker's voice (Iguchi's voice) gives her disturbing instructions for what he wants her to do. According to his words, for what she herself truly desires to do. This is the condition he sets for returning the other photographs he has taken of her.

¹⁴ Rinko works at the telephone help line, where human relationships are filtered through objects. Headsets, telephonic voices, virtual reality, no physical contact, not even visual. The content instead is utterly human; a human voice (her voice) can save lives, deflect suicidal intentions and desire for death. Also the stalker acts at a distance, through the telephone and the earphone, in a possible parallel between Rinko's work and Iguchi's action (or mission).



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Rinko buys a Taser stun-gun, a shield to defend herself from the molester, while in reverse shot torrential flows of rain continue gushing through every crack in the metropolitan cement before plunging into a close-up of a heavy iron sewer (fig. 6). The water finds ways to penetrate every shield in its path.

At home, she finds a new envelop, this time addressed to her husband, with other pictures of her autoeroticism; in the last one her gaze seems to be looking directly into the objective lens. This is the beginning of her coming to awareness.

2.5 The Moment Has Come

Rinko takes her miniskirt and leaves the apartment wearing the earphone, and the perverse game begins. In a subway toilet booth the stalker's voice orders her to change clothing, telling that something has woken up inside her and must be obeyed. Then, he forces her to enter a department store

wearing the miniskirt without her panties. Rinko complies, keeping her legs closed tightly, embarrassed to have to mingle with the crowd. The use of the hand-held camera and the editing make her/us feel that everyone is stealthily shooting her disapproving glances. Her anguish is transmitted by shaky and blurry subjective shots. Through the earphone, the stalker orders her to go and buy a vibrating dildo. In the sex shop, the lascivious glances of the customers (i.e. the consumers of the pornographic pictures of the opening sequence) humiliate her. The molester gets the vibrator's remote control inside a public bathroom without showing himself up, and then obliges the woman to stick the dildo inside her and go walking in the street. She protests, asking why he is subjecting her to such a cruelty. He replies as before; you saved my life, now I would like to return the favour. You would like to have sex, but nobody touches you. I will give you the chance to do what you desire, to live the way you want to live. In an extreme close-up, Rinko begins to listen more closely to the off-screen voice (fig. 7), and everything is played out in the expressions on her face.¹⁵

The young woman obeys. The rain is pouring down when she leaves the bathroom. The voice forces her to buy fruit and vegetables in phallic shape (aubergine, banana, cucumber, porn fetishes). The grocer stares at her with disapproval as she begins to feel bad due to the vibrator between her legs, operated in remote control by the occult molester.

Rinko returns to the public toilet stall deeply upset. The dildo's remote control and a thick folder of photographs are there. Now, she operates the vibrator by herself, adjusting the intensity and enjoying the effects. She begins to feel the pain transforming into pleasure, dominated by a big metal fan squeaking as it spins on the wall above her head (the cogwheel of the mechanism of desire). The clattering fan and the blinking light reflected on the toilet stall's door create a disturbing effect; the sound of the reawakening of desire, for the heroine, in that moment, is incomprehensible, terrifying, threatening (fig. 8). The extreme close-up of her face from the bottom up takes in the churning fan as well (fig. 9); the fan seems to oversee that forced pursuit of pleasure. A cut to the frame of the slimy snail gliding over the big hydrangea leaf emphasises the emergence of desire through an operation of Lacanian condensation obtained by skilful editing.¹⁶

15 Noa Steimatsky (2017) asserts: 'somewhere between its visual-sensory apotheosis, its psychic and ethical appeal, and the vast metaphysical horizons, the experience of the human face is strong, and it is elusive' (2).

16 It might be worth noting that, throughout the entire film, it is hard to discern whether the theme of the snail on the hydrangea - Tsukamotoian figure of desire - is diegetic or not, in confirmation of its mental and metaphoric effect. For further detail on the concept of Lacanian condensation in cinema, see Metz 1989.

2.6 Subtracted Body and Sick Body:

If I betray my desire, I'll sicken and meet my death

At home Rinko embraces the leather armchair at her husband's desk, rubbing her face along the back in substitution of her husband's absent/subtracted body. The slow movement of her face recalls the movement of the snail. A ringing phone interrupts this rite. "*Anata!*" ('you', the affectionate and familiar form of address to the husband of a Japanese wife), Rinko hopes/desires this to be Shigehiko. According to Lacan, amorous desire is the desire for the name.¹⁷

Once again, however, it is the stalker, and this time on the home phone. "Go to the doctor" says he without adding more. Alone in his room, Iguchi watches the rain slide down the window, and then delivers an abrupt punch to the mirror that shatters into pieces reflecting his face (here is another Lacanian mirror).

The motion-picture camera shoots from outside the studio window of the physician who is providing Rinko with a diagnosis of her illness (proximity to death); a *mise en abyme* of the moment using the window frame combined with the roar of the rain that also prevent from hearing the words spoken (fig. 10). This is another key sequence, a new climax. Here is the film's psychoanalytic paradigm: if I betray my desire, I will sicken and meet my death.¹⁸

2.7 Gifts (Confronting Disease)

Rinko receives a box with a hamster inside, a gift from Iguchi. In reverse shot, the rain rushes down the concrete steps. Meanwhile the young woman flips through all the photographs that depict her in various moments of her days, passing her hand over the plastic of the containers, caressing them, closing her fist around them, seeking physical contact. There is also a photo album that Iguchi has composed for her. She begins browsing: there are portraits, close-ups of her face with different gazes. The young woman is

¹⁷ Amorous desire loves the irreplaceable singularity, the uniqueness of the beloved object. It is not dispersed through the pointless pursuit of one object after another nor obsesses over universal. For this reason, it needs a distinct name in order to take possession of the unique and the unrepeatable. Amorous desire is an expression of the ability to associate a name with a body, to make a body of the name and to desire that body for its name (Recalcati 2012, 103-12). For Rinko, the gratification of her sexual desire cannot be separated from her amorous desire. Rinko desires Shigehiko (the name), and also her sexual desire is piloted by her husband's clothing, a fetish object.

¹⁸ According to Lacan, through Recalcati (2012), in psychoanalysis what makes life satisfying and worth living is not to betray the vocation of desire. Our ethical duty is to second our desire, since removal leads to disease. Being faithful to one's desire is the possible key to our happiness on this earth.



Figure 10



Figure 11

both touched and disturbed, while the hamster runs nowhere on the wheel in his cage.

Picking up the mobile phone of the cruel game, this time is Rinko that calls Iguchi. She asks him how he knew and he pronounces the terrible word: cancer. Disease, the messenger of Death. He saw something in those pictures that had to do with her breast. Also Iguchi has cancer - a cancer of the stomach, in the terminal stage (neither has Iguchi been able to turn his life account, and now he is just a man alone with himself, gazing at his reflection in the mirror, and seriously ill; fig. 11) - that was the reason he called the phone help line in the first place, thinking of taking his own life.

2.8 Tottering Between Life and Death

Rinko breaks the news about her breast cancer to her husband - in reverse shot, a river of rain keeps on plunging into the iron manhole without pause: she can save herself if she has her breast removed. Shigehiko reacts by furiously cleaning the bathroom drain, complaining about the hamster's fur and stench (Iguchi's gift introduces a living, natural element into the couple's sterile apartment, which is the emblem of Shigehiko's need for isolation, contaminating it). Rinko understands that her husband refuses the idea of the mutilation of her breast, which is more unbearable for him than her death. The rain is incessantly pouring (framing in blue and deafening noise). The theme of the pouring rain is repeatedly used for the cinematographic staging of the unconscious pressure exerted by desire, which pursues its ends and makes its way through all barriers without any possibility of stopping it, like the flowing of the water into every available slit.

In the sequence of the perfectly aseptic death of his mother, Shigehiko has taken refuge in his preferred café (habit), communicating with his wife only by phone. The man himself, despite his need for control, cannot stop



Figure 12



Figure 13

looking at the rain that keeps beating mercilessly on the window's panes. Iguchi is there, sitting at a small table aside, and observing him.

At home, the urn bearing the ashes of Shigehiko's mother (fig. 12) has been placed on the small altar his wife has set up.¹⁹

Rinko does not go to have her operation performed, but reassures her husband when he asks how it went, telling him that it was no longer necessary.

19 The course of the illness and death of Shigehiko's mother in the hospital is significant and exemplary. Her son never visits her and delegates every duty to his wife, even the funeral and cremation that aseptically close the issue. Here Tsukamoto re-proposes (after *Tokyo Fist*, 1995) his vision of the relationship with the death of beloved elders in Tokyo Metropolis (Cimalando 2010), criticising the customs of contemporary Japanese society that demands the antiseptic disappearance of the dying and the cancellation of every trace of the event. In regard to how death is considered nowadays, according to Greenber and Sullivan (2013, 8-9): "many scholars (cf. Ariès 1981; Goldberg 1998; Shilling 1993) have noted a curious phenomenon in the social history of death. It is argued that, beginning in the nineteenth century but especially in the twentieth, death became 'less visible' for many middle-class and upper-class people living in the industrialized world. From the beginnings of human culture, death has been recognized as a major event that was symbolically incorporated to the communal culture through funerary rituals designed to strengthen the social fabric in the wake of an individual's passing (cf. Block, Parry 1982). Through much of human history, death has been a common and socially shared experience. Funerary rituals continue to exist in the present, of course. However, with medical and technological advances in the past two centuries as well as general changes in social organization, death has become increasingly both a more private and a more 'institutionalized' affair, occurring largely in hospitals beyond the immediate awareness of anyone save for a few number of family members and experts (Ariès 1981). Curiously, at the same time that death has become seemingly more remote from people's everyday experience, there has been a proliferation in people's exposure to *images* of death (including vivid graphic images) in narrative cinema, television and the news media (Goldberg 1998, Shilling 1993)".

2.9 Discoveries and forced awakening

Shigehiko finds one of Rinko's pictures, and then receives a threatening phone call from the stalker, so he goes down into the street in the rain and, during the heated discussion that follows, he faints and ends up (significantly) with his face in a trash can. Iguchi had previously drugged his drink at the café and has plans for him as well.

The molester forces Shigehiko into a surreal situation that leaves him bewildered and terrified. He compels him to take part in a violent and lascivious spectacle – in which, in an expressionist pantomime, a couple is forced into a sexual act and then immersed in a strange aquarium immediately filled with water up to a possible drowning – together with other men similar to him; spectators obliged into a focused vision through bizarre conical visors with monocular lens placed on their faces, transforming them into grotesque pointing dogs (fig. 13). Once again, this is a meta-cinematographic staging in which we are clearly shown our condition as spectators watching through the motion-picture camera's monocle.

When Shigehiko discovers the existence of the stalker who photographs his wife and begins receiving that molester's attention himself, he wants to have her followed, and contacts some detective agency for the purpose, once again antiseptically, by phone. But then, the force of desire begins to act and he decides to do the task in person, putting his body at stake and exposing himself to the rain.

2.10 The revolt

Rinko, who by now has become aware of her desire, takes control of the game into which Iguchi had thrust her by force. Here is the revolt. She asks him to follow her and photograph her once again, this time consciously, with her consent. Rinko no longer wants to be the hamster in a cage running nowhere on a wheel. Maybe she has also understood that her husband will follow her.

In the alley, voluntarily exposed to Iguchi's camera, Rinko does not refuse the rain. As she undresses, touching herself and getting completely naked, she seeks out and desires the rain, opening her mouth to drink it and be possessed by it, to the rhythm of the popping flashbulbs in Iguchi's camera.²⁰ Here is the cinematographic staging of the vital drive of desire,

20 In a possible parallel with the opening sequence of the soft porn photo shoot, Iguchi uses the same methods (a large flashbulb and large objective lens) to obtain the same results – Rinko's orgasm – but with diametrically opposed ends. Rinko intends to leave an undying image of her desire to her husband while Shigehiko, shaken and overcome by the erotic body of his wife, reacts by masturbating in turn. But this does not involve an act of

erotic and poetical, in which Freud's Eros does not exclude Thanatos (the Freudian impulse towards the inorganic, the fatal, liberating quiet) and even runs towards it, given that, because Rinko refused to have her operation, she is consciously moving towards her death. Through her intense gaze (fig. 14), she seems to cry out that if she cannot physically share Eros and life itself with Shigehiko, then she might as well embrace Thanatos.

Shigehiko is there spying on her, and after dropping his umbrella – his final barrier against penetration by the rain – overcome by the revelation of the erotic body of his wife, overwhelmed by Rinko's Eros, he cannot but touch his own body as well, a body that he had kept in isolation (cloistering) and then forgotten. He is as permeated by desire as he is by the rain, and this drives him to autoerotism, following suit to Rinko. In this way, the *petite mort* of orgasm strikes both in unison, even if they are still physically distant. Now also Shigehiko hears the rain roaring loudly.

2.11 Death and Rebirth

Iguchi obliged Shigehiko, who still wants to recover all the photos of his wife, to meet and interrogate him on the reason why Rinko did not have her operation (as he saw her naked breast in the alley). He realises that Shigehiko had voluntarily ignored the question (just as he had done with his mother's illness) and preferred her dead to being mutilated. Iguchi then reveals that Rinko had herself photographed so that those pictures, in the beauty and integrity of her body – shot at the peak of her pleasure, in "that moment of absolute splendor in which the body becomes itself"²¹ – might be given to her husband as her legacy after her death. Iguchi makes Shigehiko strip naked (removing all his clothes as every other defence) and beats him up, while telling him that repressing desire leads to cancer (the Lacanian paradigm of the film). Iguchi then mortifies his body, soiling and hitting him. The surreal tentacle that protrudes from the belt around his waist and

voyeurism as an end in itself, a solitary pleasure (neither can the action undertaken in their regards by Iguchi be considered as such) that consumes itself. Shigehiko overcomes all the limits he had severely imposed in himself, allowing himself to get wet and be penetrated by the rain that he tried so hard to keep out of his own sphere (just as he had done with his wife), and finally experiences his own body: he has an erotic body of his own – which is the body desired by Rinko, that body and no other, not a body to be used once and then thrown away. The man finally catches his wife's gaze: she is watching herself (or what she will be leaving for the future after her death); she is watching him – even if she cannot see him hidden around the corner; she is watching him asleep on the *chaise longue* in the study; she is watching him when he will be left alone with these pictures of her.

21 The gratification of desire is pleasure and orgasm itself may be considered the most intense appropriation of pleasure. Lacan believes, following in the footsteps of Aristotle, that pleasure is a sort of perfection in action (Volli 2002). Rinko desires to obtain it for the precise purpose of leaving it as a bequest to her husband.



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

begins choking Shigehiko around the neck, and the oily, dark substance that he has thrown at him, give the man the grotesque appearance of a newborn just expelled from the womb (fig. 15). Iguchi, who is dying, leaves his own desire in legacy to Shigehiko, his desire for Rinko (and for a happy life as part of a couple). Rinko's desire can bring about the birth of a different man (a synthesis of the two men previously existing, in a recurring triangular scheme in Tsukamoto's films; cf. Cimalando 2010, 53).

When Shigehiko regains consciousness, he is the one drowning in the glass tank, with the image of his wife who is posing in the rain just for him in his eyes. Iguchi has driven him to panic, which in Lacanian key will lead him to the point of freeing himself from his cloistering.²²

²² In concurrence with Shigehiko's surreal experience of being enclosed in that tank of water, a part of Iguchi's situational theatre: "it is precisely panic that in the end places before us the truth of the paradox of cloistering; the panicking person perceives the Elsewhere, Otherness, even if in the terrifying form of a loss of control, of falling, dizziness, sinking, suffocation" (Recalcati 2012, 95). Iguchi tears Shigehiko from his cloistering, driving him to the point of panic, in this way giving him the chance to perceive the Elsewhere, to open

2.12 Following the Same Path

In the sequence of the self-portrait picture of Iguchi for posterity shot with the tiny camera assembled when he was a child, Iguchi chooses the physical object that represents his youthful desire for photography (for the Elsewhere) to achieve his death shot and close the circle. Then, a close-up of the imperfect circular eye of the hand-built tiny camera ready to *take* him (away). The pictures taken are two: one is his self-portrait; the other shows the same background empty, without him in it, as a presage/declaration of his imminent disappearance (fig. 16).

Lovingly cooking a meal for her husband, Rinko listens to Iguchi saying that he is about to leave over the phone. She replies to those words with a sigh of assent while the sound of the rain driving down outside intensifies, overflowing into the frame of her pensive close-up. After the line has fallen, she tells him/herself: "I'll be leaving soon, too"; because she has chosen not to undergo breast surgery, she will follow Iguchi on the same path to death.

2.13 Drive of Desire and the Defeat of Death

But Shigehiko, awoken from his torpor, is running home. In a flashback, the surreal prior events that led him to this undignified but determined race, with his face swollen from Iguchi's beating and his shirt stained with blood, abandoned his former stiffness and cold demeanour.

Shigehiko shows up at the apartment in a state of catharsis, virtually unrecognisable but immediately recognised by his wife. This immediate recognition of the desire for the Other is emblematic in the couple's exchange of intense glances, accompanied in counterpoint by an ironic little tune and the voices of policemen chasing him (caused by his unlikely snatching of a pistol from a policeman's holster to shoot Iguchi, an event that took place off-screen). Shigehiko has, in fact, established contact with his body (an erotic body according to Lacan) and rediscovered his own desire that through his orgasm (the *petite mort*) by masturbation has synchronised with Rinko's desire, and this reunification carries the seed of both the couple's rebirth and the distancing of death.

The shrill intrusive sound of the police car's siren emphasises Shigehiko's reawakening. His desire for the Other enables him to overcome his fear of the mutilation of his wife's body (in addition to overcoming his cloistering and all the other phobias that quenched every form of desire),

himself to desire, to recognise Rinko's desire, transfixed in her gaze that has been captured by the photographer's lens in the rain that day in the alley.

further to the point, it drives him to desire, to love that same mutilated and imperfect breast, kissing it tenderly.²³ Rinko laughs and cries with tears streaming down her face, and husband and wife dedicate themselves to the enjoyment of the erotic body, coupling in a desired embrace. In this way, Rinko and Shigehiko succeed in fulfilling what has been postulated as fundamental in obtaining a rich and satisfying life from a Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view: linking the One of enjoyment to the Other of desire. It has finally stopped raining, and the sun's warm light filters through the round skylight now.

The mystical chorus of *Kyrie eleison* accompanies the sequence, almost as if to indicate that this reunification/re-equilibrium in a human being's life acquires religious value that approaches the Infinite, the vanquishing of Death and immortality, while also bearing in mind the fact that the couple's carnal congress – the sexual act, the orgasm in itself – implies the possibility of procreation, offspring, and the transcendence of mortal finiteness, unlike the photograph Iguchi leaves of himself, the presence of what has been and is now no more, Death.²⁴

3 Rebellious Desire

According to Volli (2002), modern society must be considered as a virtual society due to the prevalence of technical systems based on the illusion of presence – such as the telephone with which Rinko works – that transfers relationships between human beings, even the most significant, to a plane devoid of corporeality, that negation of corporeality against which the characters in Tsukamoto's films struggle. Even in a psychological or existential sense, we inhabit a virtual world, tending more and more to express and satisfy our desire in purely imaginary ways. Rinko desires Shigehiko, in fact, but does not tell him so; she limits herself to watching him sleep and then rummages among his clothes in the closet to nourish her desire in a solitary way. Rinko *breathes* Shigehiko through his clothes and imagines making love with him, because in such a world, following Volli (2002), not

23 Tsukamoto stages Shigehiko's mental image of that mutilation, filming it in a surreal framing because the spectator knows that Rinko has not yet had her operation.

24 Dying Iguchi's self-portrait remind me Alexander Gardner's *Portrait of Lewis Payne* (1865) proposed by Roland Barthes (1980): the photo shows a prisoner sentenced to death. We know that he is already dead, because it was taken over 100 years ago. Yet seeing him before us *now*, still alive, breaks up the timeline and summons the thought that when this portrait was made, he *was about* to die. Here's the Barthesian *punctum* of photography: a dizziness, a sharp point that pierces. Barthes (1980) sees a relationship between Death and photography, because in philosophical terms, a photograph – as immobile as a lifeless body – freezes the instant and extracts what it portrays from the dynamic flow of events, in the same way that Death carried us out of life.

only the desires of human beings but also the satisfaction of such desires takes place at a virtual level, in the immaterial world of dream. In this way, Rinko lives the life of a perfect wife in strict observance of Japanese social rules that require her to be remissive, reserved, always orderly, and caring without ever expecting to receive in exchange the same care and attention from her husband.

Contemporary society tends to conceal the desire's subversive dimension behind a thick barricade of definitions of what can be or should be desired, and the catalogue of desires is physically contained in shopping centres (we see Rinko push to enter one of these during Iguchi's persecuting game), which is illustrated in magazines and continuously re-proposed. You have to desire what there already is, what is on sale, what the other people have. Significantly, as a professional photographer, Iguchi takes products for commercial catalogues, inserting himself perfectly in the mechanism.

But Lacanian desire, denying actual reality in order to imagine a more satisfying situation in its place, is by definition *subversive*. I believe that this is precisely what Iguchi sees in Rinko's solitary desire: its potential, its rebellious and regenerating power. And, consequently, Iguchi's action, in which he becomes a stalker, the premeditated persecution of Rinko and her husband, is revealed to be perverse only in appearance, because it has a subversive and beneficial purpose that carries the seeds of the revolt that signals rupture with the existent for each one of the couple, triggering in them a movement of the body that invokes change and carries with it the passion of awakening and the active acceptance of one's desire.

4 Photographs

The pictures of Rinko shot by Iguchi were not taken for his benefit (the action he performs before dying is instead for his own benefit) but for Rinko's, to let her see herself, her own face (the mirror of Freud and Lacan). Our face is the blind point of our body. Indeed, we cannot look ourselves in the face without a mirror. We see the gazes of people looking us, but never our own (or the expression on our face) on others.²⁵ Iguchi gives Rinko the chance to see herself through the photos. In this way, after overcoming her initial disgust for Iguchi's perverse action, Rinko finally sees herself and then looks, outside and inside herself. According to Roland Barthes (1980), more than any others, the photos of faces possess the *punctum*, that decisive detail that often lies in the subject's

25 For Metz, also a film is like a mirror but differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: as in the latter, anything and everything can be projected, but there is only a thing that is never reflected, i.e. the spectator's body (1989, 49)

gaze. The Barthesian *punctum* really appears to emerge from the gaze of the portrait in blue made of Rinko: the glow of a naked exposure and the chance of understanding a personality deeply. Along with photography, also cinema appears to offer the opportunity to enclose a world in an image that reproduces a gaze.

The photographs taken by Iguchi, the ones that portray her alone at home touching her body, pose a question insinuating a doubt in the spectator's mind: from which possible position had the stalker been able to take those photos? On a closer inspection, it is a position that does not seem to correspond to a place in which it is physically possible to take them. It seems, instead, the all-seeing position of the motion-picture camera. Can we imagine Iguchi perched over the round skylight photographing Rinko in the rain without being seen? The shooting positions seem entirely surreal, improbable. So, we might think that Iguchi does not exist, or better, that Iguchi is *rokugatsu no hebi* (the Snake of June): the personification of the desire that emerges and, in psychoanalytic terms, awakens the starring couple to the consciousness of what is required for them to live happy and complete lives as human beings. Therefore, the twin photographs taken by Iguchi with his childhood hand-built machine – the one that portrays him seated on a *tatami* mat and the other empty – might also be a portrait of pure inner space, that is portraits of Desire in blue.

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