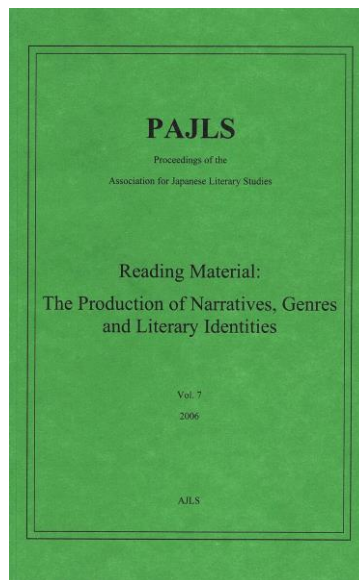


“Screening the Letter: Technology and
Spectatorship in Ōe Kenzaburō”

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Screening the Letter:

Technology and Spectatorship in Ōe Kenzaburō

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I. Assassination on the Small Screen

It was mid-afternoon on October 12, 1960 when Asanuma Kyōko, wife of the Japan Socialist Party Chair, entered her living room to watch TV. She was hoping to catch her husband in his debate with the Prime Minister and another politician, an event set to be televised nationally from nearby Hibiya Hall. The three-party debate, originally scheduled to be broadcast live, had been preempted by the hugely popular Japan Series baseball championships, and was now being tape-delayed, to be shown in its entirety after the game. As the small television warmed up, the scene of the baseball game slowly came into view and Asanuma, figuring the debate coverage would begin before too long, sat down to watch and wait.¹

A few minutes later, as she absentmindedly attended to the baseball coverage, she saw a breaking-news story scroll across the bottom of the screen: “Chairman Asanuma of the Japan Socialist Party stabbed by an assailant.” She jumped up, called to her daughter in the other room, and quickly threw together a change of clothes for her husband. She then rushed out the door and jumped into a taxi, going first to Hibiya Hall and then to the hospital. By the time she got to the hospital, her husband, she was told, had died from his wounds. It was there, also, that she learned that her husband had been killed on stage, in the middle of his speech, by a right-wing extremist youth.

The days that followed, she later wrote, were a blur – assisting with the funeral, attending to social obligations, so many activities, in fact, that she had not even found time to listen to an audio tape sent from the television network which contained her husband's final speech. But the force of the event would reassert itself five days later when she was about to leave for an Assembly Meeting against Terrorism. “I happened to be watching the noon news,” she writes, “and suddenly, there on TV, for the first time I caught sight of my husband being stabbed.” She recalls the wave of shock that came over her, the horrible sense of being thrown back into the

¹ Asanuma Kyōko, “Otto Asanuma Inejirō to tomo ni” (“With my husband, Asanuma Inejirō”), *Fujin Kōron*, December 1960, 45 (14), pp. 60-68. Also see Nakano Norikuni, “Gifu: Asanuma Inejirō no nikki” (“The Diary of my Father-in-law, Asanuma Inejirō”), *Bungei Shunjū*, November 1985, 63 (12), pp. 278-293.

time of the assassination, the terrifying experience of witnessing, so intimately and intensely, the event's unfolding.²

The assassination video, broadcast to the hundreds of thousands of viewers watching television the afternoon of the killing, was played over and over again in the days and weeks that followed, transfixing an already anxious public. Coming after a turbulent political summer, the assassination, “the most dramatic scene in television's brief history,” as one magazine at the time put it, seemed to document a resurgent right-wing force in postwar Japan.³ When the youth, three weeks later, hanged himself in prison, the networks ran the now numbingly familiar assassination footage as they described his noose (made from torn bed sheets) and his brief ‘suicide note’ (written in toothpaste on the wall), proclaiming his eternal devotion to the Emperor.⁴

The footage plays a central role also in Ōe Kenzaburō's famous two-part fictionalization of the killing, “Seventeen” and its largely silenced sequel “Seiji Shōnen Shisu” [A Political Youth Dies], which were published in January and February 1961, just weeks after the assassination took place.⁵ The story, as it is commonly described, chronicles a hapless youth's radical turn to political extremism, describing in the youth's obsessive, fanatical first-person voice how his growing autoerotic fixation on the emperor drives him to the very public assassination of a major leftist leader.⁶ But the story, despite being so dominated by the first person voice of the killer, renders the assassination itself through the videotaped footage, or rather, through an ekphrastic description of the footage, unfolding in a letter sent to the jailed youth, and referring not to the youth's experience of the killing or even to the events of the assassination per se, but rather to the assassination's presence in images, to its existence in the visual traces of its recording. My article focuses on this provocative rendering of spectatorship,

² Asanuma Kyōko, p. 62

³ “Asanuma shi shisatsu no shunkan” (“The Moment of Asanuma's Stabbing”), *Shūkan asahi*, October 30, 1960, p. 81.

⁴ Sawaki Kōtarō, “Terroru no kessan” (“Accounting for Terrorism”), *Chūō Kōron*, March, 1978, 56(3), p. 135.

⁵ The story, appearing in the volatile atmosphere of early 1961, set off a firestorm of protest. The publisher received numerous threats from right-wing organizations and Ōe himself, besieged by letters and late-night phone calls, found his home surrounded by angry demonstrators. Ōe's publisher printed an apology in the March 1961 issue, and to this day, the story's second half, “The Political Youth Dies,” remains nearly unattainable, absent from Ōe's collected works and unavailable in any officially reprinted form. In fact, many Japanese library collections have reported it missing, likely torn from the original journal by right-wing sympathizers intent on silencing it further. See Komori Yōichi, *Rekishi ninshiki to shōsetsu: Ōe Kenzaburō ron* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2002), p. 92. In recent years, there have been a handful of pirated editions published, all in violation of Ōe's wishes. The most widely available is *Sukandaru daisensō II* (Nishinomiya: Rokusaisha, 2002), pp. 122-161.

⁶ The scandalous story has been discussed by several scholars, most notably Susan Napier, Hosea Hirata, Kawamura Minato, and Komori Yōichi. But in all these cases, the focus is on how the Ōe text exceeds the strictures ordinarily set by satire. The critics explore, in other words, the work's irreconcilable staging of both a fanatical asocial interiority and an historical, social exterior world. See Susan Napier, *Escape from the Wasteland* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), pp. 150-1; Hosea Hirata, *Discourses of Seduction: History, Evil, Desire, and Modern Japanese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), p. 138; Kawamura Minato, “Tennō to seibunntiin,” in *Daitenkanki: 『60 nenkai』 no kōbō*, ed. Kurihara Yukio (Tokyo: Inpakuto Shuppankai, 2003) pp. 75-87; and Komori, pp. 80-99.

arguing that the text's depiction of the killing – exclusively and explicitly presented as a televised spectacle – illustrates not only the disorienting shock of the scene's presentation, but also the growing aggressiveness in 1960 Japan of visual images as a mode of signification. What has so radically changed with the introduction of television, Ōe's text suggests, is the aggressive availability of the scene, the increasing importance of image reproduction and circulation in structuring our experience of the world. The story seems to stage the letter as a kind of insistent spectacle, intruding on the youth's isolation, making him a witness in ways provocatively, and quite problematically, similar to the widow seeing her husband's death on TV.

*

On the afternoon of October 12, 1960, Kitakami Takeshi, like hundreds of thousands, if not a million, other viewers that day, was watching the World Series on TV.⁷ As he notes in his letter to a weekly magazine, “It was the top of the sixth inning...when a news bulletin scrolled across the bottom of the screen announcing the breaking news that Mr. Asanuma of the Socialist Party had been stabbed by an assailant. My wife and I gasped, speechless.” The baseball announcers made note of the news on the air, and then, at 3:21, with the baseball game in the bottom of the 8th inning, the network cut into the game and, as Kitakami recalled, “there was videotape, brutally replaying the horrifying moment.”⁸ The clip began with a straight-on shot, Asanuma standing behind a low podium, visible from the waist up. His voice is gravely. He raises his left hand to emphasize a particular point, and then abruptly looks up to his left. What follows, in the words of a media columnist, was “a young man suddenly collid[ing] into Asanuma with tremendous force... The speed and power of which was quite frightening.”⁹ The collision pushes them both to the right side of the stage, and a camera positioned stage-right (one of four cameras filming the scene) documents the fierceness and confusion of the struggle that ensued.¹⁰ Various men try to restrain the attacker. Asanuma, stabbed twice in the side, stumbles to the back of the stage, and collapses. The attack itself was brutally fast, and video clips of the attack usually last only a few seconds.

After Asanuma collapsed, he was rushed to the hospital, but he died en route. The youth was soon identified as Yamaguchi Otoya, a 17-year old student who had, until quite recently, been a member of a powerful radical rightist organization. Television stations, after briefly returning to baseball, soon began nonstop coverage of the killing, coverage that continued

⁷ See *Shūkan asahi*, October 30, 1960, 65 (46), p. 94. Another account of watching the event unfold on television appears in “Asanuma jiken no shōgeki” (“The Shock of the Asanuma Incident”), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 19, 1960, 5. Ironically, the Kitakami account appears in the same issue featuring “Terebi no jōzu na mikata” (“Watching TV like a pro”), 58, where the author gives advice about sitting too close to the TV set, not shining a light on the set, and other advice to protect children's eyes.

⁸ *Shūkan asahi*, October 30, 1960, 65 (46), pp. 94.

⁹ “Asanuma shi shisatsu no shunkan,” p. 81.

¹⁰ The television cameraman describes “instinctively” reacting to the unfolding scene in “Terebi shi kūzen no ketteiteki shunkan” (“The Most Definitive Moment in Television History”), *Shūkan Shinchō*, October 24, 1960, 5 (42), p. 17.

uninterrupted into the night.¹¹ NHK and other networks issued statements expressing “serious concerns” over airing “such brutality,” but they showed little restraint on air.¹² In the days and weeks that followed, “hundreds of programs” replayed the footage, running it at all hours on feature shows, specials and countless news programs. Interestingly, as a critic at the time observed, the assassination, unlike earlier events such as that summer’s massive security-treaty riots, seemed to have no “shifting reality that could be captured live.”¹³ In other words, no significant images emerged to supplement and replace the story, forcing television to return, again and again, to the original footage.

But a further force driving this repetition, I argue, was the compelling promise of clarification offered by this footage. It’s important to remember that after the turbulent summer of 1960, the understandably unsettled public was hoping the video would yield answers as to why and how this had happened. Shows produced freeze frames and slow motion, commentators in endless roundtables scrutinized the scene. The youth himself, inscrutable and unwavering, said he was acting alone – echoes of Oswald and Zapruder – and that his only motivation was loyalty to the emperor. When he hanged himself, people were even more motivated to search the video for traces of wider forces at work in the killing. These viewers, of course, were beholden to a kind of positivist fantasy that the camera can authoritatively capture the event, and that the overdetermined event could be recovered, made accessible and sensible, through enough review. What Oe’s text so astutely dramatizes, I argue, is that the spectacle offers no easy transparency, that what is required is not simply a watching of the incident, not simply a voyeurism, but a kind of transcription, a kind of reading.

II. Screening the Letter

Ōe stages the assassination late in part two of his story and, somewhat curiously for a text so utterly dominated by the youth’s first-person narration, renders it entirely through an unsigned letter, apparently sent to the imprisoned youth by a sympathetic correspondent. “The reason I started to write you this letter,” the correspondent begins, “is that you are so far removed from *your assassination*,” “confined to a lonely prison cell, [...] never able to see the video tape footage that suddenly started repeating over and over, spewing from picture tubes in all corners of the country.” “You are far from that grotesque, nonsensical” version of events, from the “images blanketing the entire Japanese archipelago like a mist.”¹⁴ Thus the letter presents itself

¹¹ Shiga Nobuo, *Shōwa terebi hōsōshi: jō* (Tokyo: Hayakawa Shobō, 1990), pp. 242-3. The small commercial station, KR Terebi, also carried the baseball game live and, according to contemporary accounts, also cut into the game with news of the stabbing. My description is based, however, on NHK’s presentation of the incident (and its aftermath) since they had a much larger audience watching their coverage and nearly all written and visual accounts concern the NHK coverage.

¹² *Nijū seiki hōsō shi: jō* (Tokyo: Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, 2001), p. 455.

¹³ Murazaki Toshio, “Rajio terebi ni miru uyoku mondai,” *Sekai*, December, 1960, 180, p.132. The article points out that with the absence of new imagery to illustrate the assassination story, the networks also relied heavily on round-table discussion (*zadankai*) to fill their broadcasts.

¹⁴ Ōe Kenzaburō, “Seiji shonen shisu: Sebuntii II,” *Bungakukai*, February, 1961, p. 36. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text.

as an admirer's alarmed report on the event's representation, an attempt to convince the youth how extensively the broadcast reproductions have reframed, indeed, distorted, the assassination. It notes how "far removed" his own experience of the killing is from the experience now defining the event: that of the obsessive, insatiable spectator. The letter condemns these developments, denouncing the media's (and the public's) frenzied, fanatical response to the event. "It was as if *your assassination* triggered symptoms of poisoning in the eyes of every Japanese," the letter writer suggests, "through the videotape that still circulates and repeats, through the news reels, through the photograph that is prompting rumors of a Pulitzer Prize for the camera man. One might even call it an eternally-recurring assassination drama (*eigō kaiki no ansatsu geki*), unfolding in picture tubes and radio speakers, in newspapers, weekly magazines, monthly journals and on every movie house screen – all these media driven mad as they pour a nuclear-grade energy into *your assassination* (36)." It is thus the event's 'singularity' that is irretrievably contaminated by poison; it is the event's meaning as a unique and wholly contained possession – *your assassination* – that cannot be isolated from commodification. He notes that the killing, as a visible and accessible event, has come to be valued for its seemingly inexhaustible ability to attract attention. Its value, in other words, now lies in its potential for further reproduction and consumption.

The letter celebrates the youth's seclusion from these forces, but it is also eager to illustrate to the youth the extent of the event's debasement – a contradiction that pervades the entire letter. In fact, as he begins to reenact the footage, he writes, "I want you to think of this letter as a small portable television (36)," and in the several pages of the letter that follow, the text becomes a kind of pseudo-television, mimicking the language and forms of television viewing. With this abrupt displacement of the youth's ecstatic monologue by the "voice of TV," the text positions the young assassin, somewhat awkwardly, alongside the reader as a mere observer of the killing. The letter reinforces this positioning with its insistent second-person address, which semantically splits the "dark youth" on screen, from "kimi," the boy who reads the letter.¹⁵ This positioning of the youth in the audience seems to dramatize the ascendancy of the television medium itself, since by displacing the youth's first hand experience of the assassination with this "small portable TV," the text documents how, even for the killer himself, experiencing the event has become synonymous with 'watching' it.

But what is also significant about this letter is how it seems to tempt the youth with the pleasures of passive observation. Despite its constant praise of his action and his denouncing of those who 'just watched,' the text seems to highlight the voyeuristic thrills made possible by television. In describing both the video footage and the still-shots from the scene, the text employs a rhetoric of power and pleasure available to camera-aided vision, indulging in the visual details, and devoting rapt attention to the images' unexpected associations and forms. In one typical passage it reads, "The image clearly shows his baggy pants tucked into spacious

¹⁵ The phrase "*your assassination*" ("*kimi no ansatsu*"), occurring again and again in the letter, is a particularly awkward construction, not only in the familiar, possibly even ridiculing, tone of its second-person form of address "*kimi*," but in its very use of the possessive. It was not uncommon at the time to refer to the event as "Asanuma's assassination" ("*Asanuma no ansatsu*"), but never to my knowledge was it called "Yamaguchi's assassination" ("*Yamaguchi no ansatsu*"), which would seem to imply that Yamaguchi was the person killed. But perhaps the phrase in the text signifies the singularity of the object under discussion, the difference between *his* experience of the assassination and the assassination experienced by others.

boots, his left leg rigid, ram-rod straight, aligned with his head in a single, powerful straight line. And from that angle, there seemed formed a small, intimate, perfect triangle: the face of the Chairman, with its downcast eyes and its pained, almost audible groans; the profile of the youth, tensed as he desperately grips the sword as if about to extract its buried blade; and the large-blossomed chrysanthemum, pinned to the Chairman's chest" (37). The exhibited bodies, the text seems to say, for all their participation in a brutal act of murder, lend themselves to the organizing gaze of the camera, becoming in the process, sites where the eye can linger and delight in the patterns revealed. In fact, by dramatizing how technology is inserting itself into the youth's experience of the killing, the text suggests how the camera's prosthetic vision asserts its superiority to unaided human perception, how the body on stage is made mute, how its significance is circumscribed to the perceptual and affective descriptions of a viewer.

But this television reenactment, quite explicitly, is represented as an effect of writing, a letter. Ōe seems to draw specific attention to the distinction between visual and verbal representation, foregrounding the 'letter' as the vehicle by which we (and the assassin) 'see' the televised scene. It is in part this act of ekphrasis, the verbal representation of an overtly visual scene, that reveals the task of Ōe's narrative here, that is, his text's attempt to reclaim the event for language itself. Indeed, the letter's very vocative structure, its use of the apostrophic figure (breaking off a discourse to address directly the suddenly absent youth), suggests how Ōe sets up an implicit struggle for lexical control of the assassination scene. The locus of perception in the letter, a radical exteriority of the unfolding action, stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the text, which stages all experience through the youth's obsessive interior monologue; that is, through his verbalization of an inner, subjective experience of events. The youth's body, mute during the killing, is in every other section given a hyperarticulate voice, one that gives vivid expression to a body increasingly shaped by politics, by an eroticized desire for an identification with the Imperial image. From its beginning, the story increasingly articulates this language of eroticized ultranationalism, documenting his growing reliance on political discourses and institutions for his sense of physical and psychical embodiment. Ōe's text seems to insist that the youth's murderous actions be reinscribed through this eroticized nationalism, and that the visible body of the killer, for all its overwhelming presence as an object of spectatorial affect and attention, is more appropriately dramatized as a subject in the sexual throes of imperial devotion. By giving the youth a language that conflates libidinal energies and imperialist ideologies, the text confronts the muteness of the assassination with an exuberant verbalization. In other words, Ōe tries to counter the fascinating flat surfaces of the footage by offering a compelling and shocking interiority.

But the question then becomes: what kind of signification is achieved through this verbalization of the assassin, what kind of event is rendered through this hyperarticulate, self-expressive subject? And conversely, what kind of signification comes into being when the televisual images are conveyed through words, when the electronic screen is pushed aside in favor of the letter-writer's pen. In asserting the primacy of writing, Ōe attempts to animate the frenzied body on screen, verbalizing its desire, and in effect, staging its action through a fanatical discourse of eroticized emperor worship. That is to say, the Ōe text seeks to reinscribe the assassination spectacle within a narrative collapsing politics and masturbatory desire, a narrative that draws on both the historical facts of the assassination and the memory of Japanese wartime fanaticism to fabricate a compelling, provocative peek into the youth's interiority. In what ways, then, does the Ōe text, in attempting to expose the inadequacies of televisual representation,

exhibit a deliberate blindness to the limitations of the literary? If the ‘authentic’ voice of the assassin is what is fabricated, what might such a fabrication mask? And finally, how does the text’s apparent preference for the letter – its suggestion that critical insight comes through a lexicalization of technological images, that linguistic narration of subjectivity offers the preferred means for penetrating insight (and here we see the available metaphors of knowledge themselves favoring the ‘interior’ over the ‘exterior,’ depth over surface) – play out against the crisis of signification set in motion by the text?¹⁶

¹⁶ I am indebted to Jonathan Abel for pointing me toward these more expansive interpretations. He even suggests that the letter itself may perform a more acute critical function, dramatizing its own inadequacies in recounting the image not only on the meta-discursive level (offering the reader this insight), but also on a diegetic level (offering the Yamaguchi character, the temporarily silent, absent figure, some sense of how his experience fares under these modes of representation)? He also asks if maybe the text’s subsequent history (its suppression by the right-wing, the injunction on any reprinting – a prohibition authorized by Ōe himself) suggests some means of reflecting on its staging of this signifiatory crisis? Might the text’s near-total suppression even buttress the text’s suspicion of images, substantiating its claims for the power of the word?