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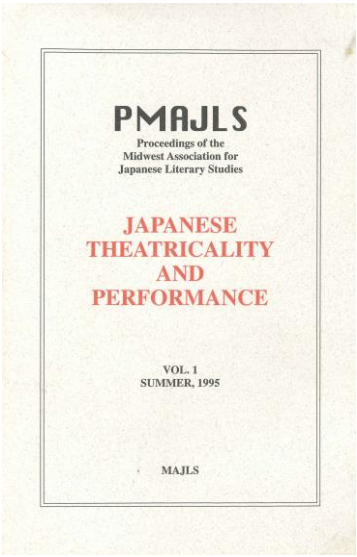

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Liquid Cinema: Topologies of Emulsion in Two Japanese Films

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> I suddenly remembered a shower of black rain . . . . Thundery black clouds had borne down upon us from the direction of the city, and the rain from them had fallen in streaks the thickness of a fountain pen. . . . I washed my hands at the ornamental spring, but even rubbing at the marks with soap wouldn't get them off. They were stuck fast on the skin.
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> --Ibuse Masuji[1]

The *OED* defines an "emulsion" as "any mixture of two immiscible liquids (e.g. oil and water) in which one is dispersed throughout the other in small droplets." A paradox, then, appears in the notion of an immiscible mixture, an impossible synthesis that remains incomplete, suspended. The principle of emulsion, of course, facilitated the advent of photography in the early nineteenth century. By fixing light or other forms of radiation on a chemically-treated photosensitive plate, the photograph holds the image between surface and atmosphere, film and air. The *photograph* is neither absorbed by the surface nor is it allowed to dissipate into the air. The image is held between the two *topoi*, an effect of the interstice opened by the immiscible mixture. Besides

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[1]Masuji Ibuse, *Black Rain*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969), 34-35.

being the process on which photography is based, the emultive action has had a considerable effect on the *eidos* of photography and film. This paper seeks to explore the emultive reaction, that is, the effect that the paradox which founds the photographic media has upon its performance, its substance.

Two scenes from two Japanese films, Mizoguchi Kenji's *Ugetsu* (1953) and Kobayashi Masaki's *Kwaidan* (1964), exemplify the play of emulsion in the cinema, its seepage into the narrative space. In Mizoguchi's work, an adaptation of Ueda Akinari's 1758 literary text *Ugetsu Monogatari* (first published in 1776), the scene occurs during an encounter between the potter Genjūrō and his phantom seducer and tormentor, Lady Wakasa. Disguised as a woman, the demon Wakasa has been gradually depleting Genjūrō of his vitality, drawing him closer toward death. Having forgotten his former life, his abandoned family and dreams, Genjūrō has become translucent. In contrast, Wakasa has increased her presence in the material world, drawing sustenance from Genjūrō's life-force. At the point of their encounter, then, the two subjects are hovering between their proper worlds, occupying bodies that are in various states of immateriality. Prior to the scene, a passing priest has diagnosed Genjūrō's condition, reading the signs of possession on his face, and has offered to save the potter from his fate. His remedy involves the inscription of Sanskrit prayers upon Genjūrō's body. According to the Buddhist prescription, the holy text will protect Genjūrō's body and soul from the demonic grasp.

In the encounter between the tattooed Genjūrō and the unsuspecting Wakasa, the talisman intervenes and disrupts the final contact between living and dead, the transgressive communion. Genjūrō announces his intention to depart from

Wakasa's mansion where he has been kept, entranced. Attempting to persuade Genjūrō to stay, Wakasa leans forward to grasp her captive. As she makes contact, however, Wakasa recoils in pain, immediately realizing what has transpired. The two are separated at that moment by the surface of Genjūrō's skin, his living flesh, which has been stained, re-materialized, by the priest's inscription. Here, the written word intervenes as a kind of screen. Not only is Genjūrō reclaimed by the living word, he is turned into a kind of emulsion: part living and part dead, part skin and part text, he has become a suspended animation. In fact, the entire scene is figured by the rhetoric of the emulsion. Spirit and body, *thanatos* and *hupnos*, feminine and masculine, *phone* and *logos*, tactile and optical are suspended within the frame of this encounter. Not only do the two subjects form an immiscible mixture but Genjūrō himself embodies it, bearing the trace of a foreign substance on his flesh. The scene concludes when Wakasa retreats into the shadows, unable to overcome the divide that Genjūrō's painted skin imposes, and he lapses into unconsciousness. Genjūrō awakens the next morning, as if from a dream, lying half-naked and alone beside Wakasa's mansion, which has been reduced to ruin during the course of the night.

Ultimately, Genjūrō slips into another phantom interstice, that sustained by his wife Miyagi. Betrayed and abandoned, Miyagi is killed by renegade soldiers before Genjūrō's return. She has, however, deferred her departure from the living world, choosing to wait for her husband's return. Miyagi spends one final evening with Genjūrō before passing into the world of the dead. Genjūrō's encounter with his phantom wife thus repeats his prior affair with Wakasa. He seems, in this sense, prone to repetition compulsion, destined to recreate the uncanny sexual encounter. Stripped of his scriptures, Genjūrō

consummates the Orphic reunion with his dead wife. Similar to his previous experience, Genjūrō awakens to find Miyagi gone. She rejoins Genjūrō at the conclusion of the film, however, in the form of a disembodied voice. Miyagi enters Genjūrō through his ear as he returns to his work, mixing and kneading the amorphic clay into various shapes.

The suspense that frames Genjūrō and Wakasa (and to a lesser degree Genjūrō and Miyagi) determines a unique topography, one that can only take place within the cinematic scope. The immiscible properties that Genjūrō and Wakasa represent are neither blended nor eliminated but rather sustained to produce a third term, a distinct realm of phenomenality. That third term or realm is produced not only as an effect of the narrative content but as an effect of the filmic medium. In the vocabulary of cinema, the encounter between Genjūrō and Wakasa can be seen in light of what Christian Metz has called an "impression of reality." Put another way, both figures in the scene have been reduced to impressions, to photograms pressed onto the surface of reality.

Concerning the so-called "cinema effect," Metz insists on the distinction between the illusion and impression of reality. "The dreamer," he asserts, "knows that he is dreaming; the film spectator knows that he is at the cinema."[2] In other words, the spectator never fully accepts the film as a substitute for reality but rather allows his or her consciousness to be lulled into a state of suggestibility. The "special regimes of filmic perception," writes Metz, "intervene in a more fleeting, episodic fashion; they move a bit further towards genuine illusion (though without ever reaching it) during the brief

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[2]Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 101.

instant of a psychical giddiness."[3] In order to experience the film, to enter into the domain of its effect, the spectator must succumb to this psychical giddiness. Suspended between reality and illusion, the spectator must enter, like Genjūrō and Wakasa, the moment of contact between illusion and impression: the "brief instants of fleeting intensity" determine, in Metz's words, a "*perceptual transference*" between illusion and impression, consciousness and unconsciousness. It is as if the conscious and unconscious faculties have formed an emulsion: "one . . . dispersed throughout the other in small droplets." Building upon Metz's work, Jean-Louis Baudry describes such moments of disorientation as "artificial psychoses."[4] (In his review of the film, Ueno Ichiro, "regrets[s] that the fantastic and real realms do not blend harmoniously."[5]) Arguably, the tear that separates Wakasa's fingertips from Genjūrō's skin, and the spectator from the screen, forms a series of emulsions, one within another, extending outward like liquids within liquids.

In fact, the terminology of fluids saturates the narrative.[6] Although the scene of inscription in Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* does not occur in Akinari's original, the literary text nonetheless makes numerous references to liquids and fluidity. In the original, the priest himself dispels the demon and her attendant. In Akinari's words: "A spout of water ascended, as

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[3]Ibid., 107.

[4]Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, trans. Jean Andrews and Bertrand Augst (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 315.

[5]Ueno Ichiro, Review, in *Ugetsu: Kenji Mizoguchi, director*, ed. Keiko I. McDonald (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 118.

[6]For a discussion of the imagery of water in *Ugetsu*, see Robin Wood, "Mizoguchi: The Ghost Princess and the Seaweed Gatherer," in *Ugetsu*, ed. McDonald, 145-156.

if to the sky, and the two women disappeared. Clouds engulfed the party and as though spilling black India ink brought down a torrential deluge of rain."[7] Here, the torrent replaces the text, descending upon Genjūrō (Toyoo in the original) and flushing his skin with India ink. While Mizoguchi has further solidified the ink by transforming the black rain into calligraphy, he has not entirely erased its aquatic force.

Liquid imagery continues in other scenes throughout Akinari's text. A second priest who tries to exorcise the demons by mixing sulphur with medicine water meets his match when "the creature [opens] its mouth more than three feet wide; its crimson tongue [darting], as if to swallow the priest in a single gulp."[8] In the encounter, the priest is engulfed by "poisonous vapours" and ultimately lapses into unconsciousness. "His face and body were mottled red and black," writes Akinari, "as though they were stained with dye."[9] The demons, which have metamorphosed into snakes, are ultimately vanquished, in Akinari's text, by a monk's robe "saturated in mustard-seed incense." The sensorium in *Ugetsu* that ranges from touch to smell travels through a fluidic economy.

The emultive flow seeps into another scene, another encounter between immiscible elements. In Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, also adapted from a literary work (Lafcadio Hearn's 1904 text of the same name), the encounter between phantom and flesh is similarly mediated by the ink-written text. Kobayashi's vignette "Hōichi the Earless," begins with the

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[7]Ueda Akinari, "The Lust of the White Serpent," in *Ugetsu Monogatari: Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, trans. Leon Zolbrod (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1974), 177.
[8]Ibid., 180.
[9]Ibid.

depiction of a battle from the *Heike Monogatari* which chronicles the twelfth-century defeat of the Heike at the hands of the Genji clan. The conclusive battle of "Dan-no-ura" in the Straits of Shimonoseki marks the site where the Heike "perished utterly, with their women and children, and their infant emperor."[10] "And that sea and shore," writes Hearn, "have been haunted for seven hundred years."[11]

At the water's edge, then, the story of the blind monk Hōichi begins to unfold. Famed for his musical skills on the lute (*biwa*), Hōichi's recitation of the battle of "Dan-no-ura" is said to have reduced even goblins [*kijin*] to tears. The capacity to liquefy goblins speaks to Hōichi 's anomalous status, his position on the emultive threshold. Enveloped in waves and tears, Hōichi is approached by the spirits of the dead warriors who ask him to recite the story of the battle in a cemetery. Hōichi believes that he is performing in a palace. While the spectator who sees Hōichi performing at the grave sites of the Heike warriors, this view is denied to the blind Hōichi.

As Hōichi's nocturnes begin to result in signs of physical deterioration, an alarmed priest follows Hōichi to his nightly rendezvous with the Heike. Upon confirming his suspicions, the priest orders the familiar Buddhist remedy: Hōichi 's naked body is to be covered with prayers in order to protect him from the ghosts who are, like Wakasa, drawing Hōichi closer toward the threshold of death. During the ritual inscription, the red paint is first applied to Hōichi 's body, blending with the reddish hue that suffuses the shot. Next, the black ink prayers are inscribed across the surface of his body. Covered

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[10]Lafcadio Hearn, "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi," in *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1971), 3.
[11]Ibid.

thus in prayer, Hōichi is instructed to remain perfectly still when his nightly phantom escort comes for him.

The encounter between Hōichi and the warrior-ghost begins with the slow materialization of the phantom in the temple courtyard. As his shape solidifies before the spectator's eyes, stopping just short of full opacity, the phantom starts to call Hōichi 's name. The trace of echo, pronounced at first, gradually recedes as his voice, like his body begins to stabilize. The point-of-view that determines this scene posits the spectator as its subject. That is, the phantom is rendered from the perspective of a seeing human subject. Receiving no answer from Hōichi, the phantom enters the temple in an attempt to locate the blind monk. At this point, the camera captures Hōichi who is now shown in his translucent, invisible state. The shift in perspective transfers the position of the subject to the phantom. Hōichi 's invisibility is seen from the unseeing vantage of the phantom. Kobayashi's shift in point-of-view liquefies the encounter, releasing the look from a stable subject-position.

The invisible Hōichi is not, however, entirely protected from the phantom's gaze. As the title forbodes, Hōichi 's ears are vulnerable to the phantom. The priest had forgotten to cover Hōichi 's ears with prayer, exposing them to the ghostly touch. Seeing only Hōichi 's ears, the phantom escort muses: "So that explains why he did not answer: he had no mouth to answer with--there is nothing left of him but his ears. . . . Now to my lord those ears I will take--in proof that the august commands have been obeyed, so far as was possible."[12] With those words, the ghost tears Hōichi 's ears from his body. The blind Hōichi is rendered earless.

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[12]Ibid., 18.

In *Kwaidan*, the optical divide separates flesh from shade, the real from the phantastic whereas the existential threshold in *Ugetsu* is determined by the tactile senses. Vision and touch, opticality and tactility, define two mechanisms that differentiate between a series of suspended topologies: masculine/feminine, life/death, literature/film, language/body, voice/sign, and natural/supernatural. They are, of course, mediated by the aural sign. Between the two, then, a sensual topology, a topology of sense, begins to emerge. And this sensual topology, in turn, speaks to the very texture of language. For, the question of the materiality of language has always involved the site of its ingestion. In the two scenes, then, that question has been suspended between the sensualities that are opened by the dialectic of opticality and tactility. The phantomic encounters in *Ugetsu* and *Kwaidan* chart a space between the two, at once optical and tactile and yet properly neither. A polymorphic zone that reconfigures the phenomenological subject.

Opticality and tactility are embodied by the representational media that house them: in this case literature and cinema. The relationships of *Ugetsu* and *Kwaidan* to their literary origins are structured to a large degree by their renderings of the transition from literature to cinema, text to specter. Within each scene, the metamorphic force of the literary corpus is figured by the writing that covers Genjūrō's and Hōichi's bodies. In both films, the idea of writing on the body functions as a mechanism for preventing the ghostly contact that threatens to absorb Genjūrō and Hōichi into the "other" world or the world of the imaginary. Furthermore, although Genjūrō has carried on a relationship with Wakasa prior to his inscription, it is not until the scene in question that Genjūrō encounters Wakasa with the knowledge of her true

identity. Similarly, although Hōichi had been performing for the deceased Heike over the course of several nights, it is not until the night of his disfigurement that Hōichi understands the true nature of his patrons. In each case then, the *exscription* appears as an index of knowledge transcribed upon the individuals' bodies. A logographic tissue intervenes between two bodies of immateriality, generating, as it were, an emulsion.

Between literature and film, then, a virtual site of emulsion begins to emerge: the living overflows into the ghostly to produce an uncanny world which cannot be entirely exhibited nor, for that matter, perceived. Moreover, both films, made in the postwar era, attempt to reach two classical literary texts that are themselves efforts to absorb Japan's histories of warfare. The literary text appears as a trace, a memory, a remnant of the Japanese archive that is, perhaps, destroyed in World War II. In this sense, Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* and Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* can also be understood as having introduced a time between the past and present that hangs in the balance of history--an emulsion in and of time. The two scenes describe a third temporality that hovers between the historicity of literature and film, pre- and postwar Japan. This temporality is, according to the atomic icon that marks Japanese literary and film production after World War II, a *photoliterary* instant: a brief moment of intensity that is facilitated by the liquidation of the word.