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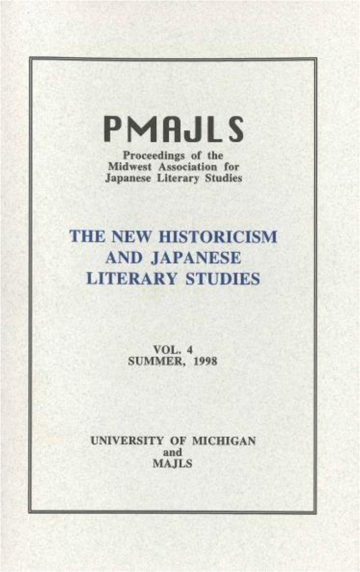
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Festival and Form in Ichikawa's Yukinojō henge

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Ichikawa Kon's 1963 film Yukinojō henge (An actor's revenge) has been noted for its cinematic play and parody. A remake of Kinugasa Teinosuke's 1935 film of the same title, this later version depicts the story of Yukinojō, an onnagata actor (kabuki female impersonator) who uses his performative skills to wreak revenge upon the merchants responsible for the ruin and suicide of his parents. Although it was filmed thirty years later, the 1963 remake features the same star as the 1935 version, Hasegawa Kazuo. Thus, it both parodies the original film and plays with the star recognition of an actor the viewers all knew to be an accomplished performer in his own right.[1] On a reception level, too, the film plays with the conventions of a supposedly young and beautiful onnagata as his role is played by an actor then fifty-five years old. "So bad as to be good," it is a film that both questions and supports its melodramatic theme of revenge.[2]

This 1963 film has been the subject of at least two recent articles in English, pointing to the continued interest of this seemingly "camp" film. Scott Nygren's article, "Inscribing the Subject: The Melodramatization of Gender in An Actor's Revenge," and Keiko McDonald's chapter, "kabuki Stage and An Actor's Revenge," describe such qualities as the film's parody of kabuki or shimpa form and of earlier Japanese cinematic convention, as well as its play on cinematic reality vs. stage reality and the sexuality of the main character, Yukinojō. While recognizing these contextual observations, this paper hopes to look at the 1963 version of Yukinojō henge from a perspective that more fully recognizes the violence at the heart of the film. Its plays on sexuality and levels of reality are what make this film aesthetically interesting, yet these formal elements also interact with its underlying myth of violence and central theme of revenge. Thus, Ichikawa's film may be understood as a filmic "festival" in which violence, sexuality, and form are inseparable. Yukinojō henge displays a violence that is stimulated by a play of gender and stage convention and exhibited in the formal elements of the film before exploding into a social, sacrificial festival.

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[1] The opening credits inform us that this is, "The 300th Film of the Actor, Hasegawa Kazuo."

[2] Richie, 190. Donald Richie notes that Ichikawa was given this project for commercial reasons—as a kind of punishment for Daiei's dissatisfaction with his earlier productions. Yet Ichikawa viewed this melodrama as something so overdone that it had to be well received.

Film as Festival

Yukinojō henge begins with an extreme-long shot of a white, snow-laden stage, on which Yukinojō, a kabuki actor in onnagata costume, dances the part of a maiden with paper snow falling around him.[3] The camera cuts to a medium-long shot of the actor which allows us to appreciate his feminine charm—his bright clothing, his graceful gestures (despite the fact that his age is obvious behind his makeup). We are not the only viewers to notice his charm, for the camera cuts to a woman in the audience (whom we later learn to be Namiji) as her hand moves to her breast, obviously infatuated with Yukinojō's idealized onnagata blending of male and female. In a series of cross-cut close shots, we realize that behind his stage mask, Yukinojō is emotionally intense and aware of Namiji's gaze. Suddenly, the paper snow and stage props transform into a real winter scene of snow falling from a gray sky. After Yukinojō's performance enters this "cinematic reality," we hear through his voice-over and see through a superimposed "mind's eye" the identity of the men surrounding this young woman.[4] They (including her father, Lord Dobe) were responsible for the ruin and suicide of his parents. "No matter how difficult it may be," he vows to his father, he will avenge their death. Yukinojō stumbles and falls to the ground. He looks up at Namiji and, in voice-over, plots to use her in his quest for revenge. He slumps, dead, and the "real" scene transforms back into a stage setting. The camera pulls back to a wide, traditional view of the stage, the curtain closes, and heads darken the bottom of the screen as the audience stands to clap.

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[3] This traditional, wide, stage shot is reminiscent of the first views of kabuki on film. See the first chapter of Keiko McDonald's Japanese Classical Theater in Films for a discussion of the characteristics of early Japanese film.

The theme of the film has been set. Yukinojō will use his performative skills to avenge his parents in the offstage social context of the film. In the following sequence of scenes, Yukinojō's onnagata stage skill is commented upon. Ohatsu, a female pickpocket who later becomes infatuated with him, says how kimigawarui (creepy) Yukinojō makes her feel, him being "neither man nor woman." Another character expresses how "funny" his perfect blending of male and female makes her feel. Thus, the film identifies itself as a play on gender identification and also comments on the boundaries between stage and reality.[5] Yet my interpretation of this opening does not stop here, for on another level, it is presented with purpose. Revenge, the violence that reveals itself throughout this play on gender and stage, is introduced.

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[4] See Donald Richie's Japanese Cinema: An Introduction (Oxford University Press, 1990) for a brief note on this film's references to earlier Japanese cinematic techniques.

[5] Scott Nygren's article is also careful to note this quality of the film. His use of it as a means of discussing the question of psychoanalysis in a Japanese context is interesting, although observations in note eight of this paper may complicate his argument.

These first few scenes are reminiscent of the beginning of the festival as described in Reneåå Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*. In his fifth chapter on Dionysis, Girard writes, "The fundamental purpose of the festival is to set the stage for a sacrificial act that marks at once the climax and the termination of the festivities."[6] Festivals, in the Girardian sense, often involve "an overall elimination of difference" accompanied by "unnatural acts" and "outrageous behavior" and often "violence and strife." Festival is ultimately concerned with sacrifice; and although this sacrifice may manifest itself in violent ways, it is ultimately concerned with the actual removal of violence from society. While we may dispute the details of Girard's interpretation of festival, this general *idea* of festival provides an appropriate framework through which to interpret this film.

Yukinojō henge's opening stage literally prepares the viewer ("sets the stage," in the Girardian sense) for a sacrifice and the violent revenge which is to be played out in the film. This pending sacrifice is set up in the identification of Yukinojō's resolve to avenge his parents no matter what the cost and in the methodical lining up of the characters involved in this tale of revenge: Yukinojō, his father, Namiji (the young woman), and the three merchants responsible for his parents' deaths, Lord Dobe, Kawaguchiya, and Hiromiya. The play which frames the story also hints toward the centrality of violence to the film. The kabuki play in which Yukinojō is portrayed at the beginning and end of the film is *Sagimusume: Yanagi ni hina shocho no saezuri* (White heron maiden).[7] It tells the story of a maiden who turns into a heron in order to avenge her parents' deaths, and obviously parallels the violent future to which Yukinojō commits himself and the revenge that will ultimately rid the screen of that violence.

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[6] Girard, 119.

Most disturbing in this beginning sequence is its "overall elimination of difference," and it is here where Girard's violent festival is almost unconsciously displayed. As Yukinojō's stage becomes real and he dances on actual (not paper) snow, the differences between cinematic and stage reality are flattened and made ambiguous. It is interesting that only after the film commits this initial outrageous cinematic act is Yukinojō, in terms of the film, able to actively pursue and plot his revenge; only then does he speak and is the emotional violence that lies beneath his onnagata stage mask allowed to surface. This "elimination of difference" is heightened as his stage performance, meant to be watched from a distance, is interrupted by voice-over and closeups which speak directly to the audience. Moreover, the portrayal of Yukinojō, a young and beautiful character, is disturbed by Hasegawa's obviously aged face.

Following this unnatural flattening of difference are more "outrageous" acts, most obviously concerned with an elimination of gender differences. Yukinojō, whether on stage or off in the "real" social context of the film remains in lavish, "feminine" kimono, and his thoughts are spoken in falsetto. Yet this portrayal of gendered tropes may not be strictly limited to the dichotomies of male and female. Rather, as Yukinojō plays an array of roles throughout this film, he moves fluidly from on-stage onnagata (stage female impersonator) to wakashū (offstage feminized boy/young man).[8] For example, when he interacts with Namiji,

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[7] McDonald, 152.

[8] Wakashū refers to the younger boy of a homosexual relationship in "pre-modern" Japan. Paul Gordon Shalow's introduction to Ihara Saikaku's The

Yukinojōμ displays an idealized, feminine, onnagata charm. Yet while he remains in feminine costume, he interacts with his mentor as a subordinate man and attracts Ohatsu in a sexually male manner.

Festival as Form

Yukinojō henge, filled with the "outrageous" play for which this film is known, presents itself as a filmic, formal festival. Violence and revenge, which are publicly unleashed only at the end of the melodrama, infect the textual and formal elements of the film itself. Having recognized his parents' murderers, Yukinojō sits backstage with his mentor and talks of revenge. The camera cuts to a close shot of Yukinojō's purely evil and revenge-filled face. In a cross-cut, his mentor is obviously unsettled by the force of his desire for revenge. In a similar manner, this film becomes for the viewer a chaotic festival of disturbing textual play. Levels of reality are played upon as characters of the film's "real" social construct are set against bare, silent stage props. Overplayed stage acting replaces the audience expectation of more natural and "realistic" filmic acting. Eclectic styles of music, from lounge jazz to BGM to traditional Japanese, are dispersed throughout the Edo-period film. Nothing is presented as it should be; no setting is presented according to its genre.

Along with these formal transgressions, surrounding characters not only comment on but also double Yukinojō. Keiko McDonald notes the importance of "doubling" in kabuki drama,

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Great Mirror of Male Love describes the kind of "boy love" particular to kabuki actors. As opposed to the samurai class' idealistic boy love, young kabuki actors often served as boy prostitutes in the theater districts of Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo (Tokyo). Yukinojō's status as a prostitute is questionable, but his fluid movement between onnagata idealization and wakashū sexuality seems an apt description to add to Scott Nygren's dichotomy of male vs. female (see note five).

and these conventions certainly influence the film. Moreover, Ichikawa should be recognized for his outrageous extension of Edo tradition into cinema. The actor, Hasegawa Kazuo, plays the parts of both Yukinojō and Yamitarō, a good thief who steals for the poor.[9] Yukinojō (in lavish kimono) and Yamitarō (in cotton) are often juxtaposed, each doubling the other and successively replacing each other's space within the screen; they even speculate that they must be brothers. In other scenes, Yamitarō takes on the role of the audience, commenting on Yukinojō's actions and emotions; at still other moments, he actually interferes with the intrigue surrounding Yukinojō. These two characters are then displayed in "play" with other characters. Yukinojō becomes the seducer (wakashū/male) of Namiji, and is also presented as her (onnagata/female) double as they both reach for a cup at the same time, bowing charmingly as they realize their simultaneous act. Yamitarō is doubled by another thief, Hirutarō, who wants to be like him.[10] And everyone interacts with and is commented upon by Ohatsu, a female pickpocket, who is first repulsed by Yukinojō, then comes to desire him, displaces her affection for him onto Yamitarō, and finally comments upon Yukinojō and Yamitarō's similarity. Yet this play does not stop here, for the film continues to present layer after layer of characterization, intrigue, and commentary.

This dizzying array of textual play and narrative interaction (by no means adequately described) suggests that the parody for which this film has been noted must be modified slightly. Yukinojō henge's unordered screen must be redefined to fully appreciate its qualities of chaotic, formally transgressive, and thus violent festival. Recently, a few scholars have begun to use the term "overtext" to characterize Edo arts and their production.[11] As opposed to traditionally understood concepts of parody and pastiche in which a text identifies an original and its reference occurs only once, "overtext" allows for unlimited possibilities. It offers a theoretical approach from which to interpret a chaotic screen. In this schema, layers of art and discourse overlay one another, with each layer adding meaning to the text. Thus, the "original" is only one reading and the viewer's interpretation constitutes the latest. This identification of an original as signifying only one of many possible readings is significant. What I have thus far termed "play" (I have consciously avoided parody) refers to this sense of overtext. Indeed, the production qualities of overtext may be found in the first few scenes of the film in its melodramatic theme of revenge, the framing kabuki play, its references to earlier cinematic techniques, and its use of kabuki convention. Each of these artistic layers overlay the film with additional interpretations, all of which are disordered.

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[9] In the 1935 version of Yukinojō henge, Hasegawa Kazuo also played the role of Yukinojō's mother.

[10] Note that yami means dark and hiru means light.

Yet this formal play leads toward an ending which is pure, sacrificial festival. Here, the violence which has been lurking beneath this festival of flattened differences and outrageous cinematic acts lashes out to the social context of the film in an uncontrolled climax. In a montage sequence that seems out of place against the previous formal play, the city of Edo erupts into rice riots, with images of crowds rushing through the streets and hands grabbing rice interspersed with close shots of stunned, haggard faces. The innocent Namiji becomes Yukinojō's hand of vengeance as she inadvertently knifes Hiromiya. She subsequently dies of shock, and Yukinojō grotesquely sends her body to her father in a box. Most significantly, Yukinojō confronts Kawaguchiya and Lord Dobe (two men responsible for his parents' deaths), taking on the faces of his dead parents. Kawaguchiya's recognition of Yukinojō as his deceased father drives the merchant to madness; Lord Dobe drinks poison and dies gasping in pain after he recognizes Yukinojō as his mother.

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[11] My understanding of overtext is derived from discussions with Professor Sumie Jones, as well as from a draft of her paper given at the 1997 conference for the Association for Asian Studies, "Overtext and the Anxiety of Writing: Sawada Natari's Ana Okashi."

These two scenes, in which Kawaguchiya and Lord Dobe recognize Yukinojō as his mother and father, are the most violent and sacrificial moments of the film. Yukinojō is not simply playing a role; Yukinojō is his parents.[12] In these moments we see examples of the most disturbing yet characteristic qualities of this film—the violence, the chaotic flattening of difference, and an overtextual layering of one character over another.

Sexuality and Form: Restoration

It is Yukinojō's ability to be, not simply represent, everything, to flatten the boundary between reality and stage and make ambiguous sexual difference that stimulates the underlying violence and theme of revenge. Yukinojō is everything—stage attraction and film character, onnagata and wakashū, Yukinojō and Yamitarō, Namiji's lover and Namiji's double, his father and mother, and the actor, Hasegawa Kazuo (a fact the spectator is never allowed to forget in the obvious age disparity between role and performer). Thus in Yukinojō sexuality, violence, and filmic form are tied together. Indeed, the scenes described above are difficult to interpret without a recognition of the relationship between form and meaning, particularly in terms of crossing formal and sexual boundaries. This crossing of borders culminates most violently when Yukinojō crosses over to death, becoming his parents in his quest for revenge. As I noted earlier, a collapse of sexual boundaries is also exemplified in the figure of Yukinojō.

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[12] This reading of the film was influenced by an entry in Hattori Yukio's Edo kabuki no biishiki (Edo kabuki aesthetics. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1996). Pages 71-79 describe a Japanese history/myth that regards the origin of actors as figures who appeased spirits on behalf of society by dancing the roles of (and in a sense, becoming) them.

Roland Barthes, in his assessment of the castrato of Balzac's Sarrasine, points to a similar connection between meaning and the flattening of sexual difference: "In copying woman, in assuming her position on the other side of the sexual barrier, the castrato will transgress morphology, grammar, discourse."[13] For Barthes, castration infects all representational systems, whether sexual, linguistic, or textual. He is insightful in recognizing the relationship between sexuality and rhetoric, between paradox and form. Indeed, Yukinojō displays this relationship in his simultaneous flattening of sexuality and the textual realities that surround him. Yet Barthes's reading does have its limitations, for as overtext reminds us, this play is not a one-shot reference; rather, it is coeval—sexuality affects the text and the text affects sexuality. Moreover, his reading of Sarrasine as an inherently lacking being, a castrato, is not fully applicable to Yukinojō who does not lack but rather is everything.

Barthes's reading of Sarrasine may seem an inapt comparison to Yukinojō henge. However, beyond his recognition of the inseparability of form and sexuality, I invoke Barthes's argument in order to point to a particular reaction against him. Kari Weil, in her Androgyny and the Denial of Difference, attacks certain Freudian and poststructuralist theories (i.e. Barthes) that tend to categorize the androgyne in terms of the phallus—when the androgyne is whole, he/she is ultimately male. Weil argues instead for "taking pleasure in such a confusion of boundaries."[14] While she speaks specifically to Western and feminist informed ideas of the androgyne, this is exactly the sort of pleasure invested in Yukinojō. As he (overtexually) embodies disparate texts and characters, Yukinojō becomes not an understandable whole, but rather a fragmented and confused character.

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[13] Barthes, 66. My reading of Barthes is aided by Kari Weil's analysis in her Androgyny and the Denial of Difference.

The disordered figure of Yukinojō is central to Ichikawa's violent festival, and festival requires restoration in the end. In the final scene of Yukinojō henge, Yukinojō (still in his onnagata/wakashū costume) is portrayed in three long takes with his back to the camera. In the first, Yukinojō stands in the center of a long-shot, surrounded by a staged field thatsways in the wind. The camera then fades to an extreme-long shot in which his figure is barely discernable, and in the final shot we can no longer distinguish Yukinojō from his surroundings. Over this scene, a narrator (the first we have heard throughout the film) informs us that Yukinojō has disappeared from Edo, never to be seen again. Although there were initially rumors of his whereabouts, people soon forgot that there ever was a Yukinojō. The festival is now over, revenge has been played out, and the screen must be restored to its former order. Yukinojō, both sexually and textually ambiguous and disordered, cannot survive in Edo after the restoration of its festival.

Yet Yukinojō does not completely disappear. Over the final scene of an empty field, the narrator questions both Yukinojō and the melodramatic revenge of the film: "Who was it who remembered the story of Yukinojō?...Was it Yamitarō?...Or Kikunojō?...Or was it Ohatsu?" Here, Yukinojō remains ambiguous to the end—did he exist or not? And as Yukinojō's existence is questioned, the melodramatic revenge in which his whole existence has been caught also becomes suspect. Just as its main character's sexuality is undefined, the film Yukinojō henge also remains undefinable — even its festival is not absolute. The festival which has helped us to understand the melodramatic revenge at the heart of this film has been, in a sense, overturned by its very play.

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[14] Weil, 13.

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