

***Seeking for New Values: Failure and Crisis of Models in Tsukamoto's and
Kurosawa's Tokyo Films***

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Abstract

The postwar Japan was subject to deep identity mutations as a result from the defeat and the social reforms often dictated by the American occupant. In spite of Japan's independence recovered from American occupation followed by the postwar "Japanese miracle" of the 1950s and the 1960s, the specter of defeat still haunts contemporary Japan as a result of social mutations at the cost of tradition.

Such mutations were criticized by artists and intellectuals such as Mishima, deeply concerned by the fall of patriarchal authority at the favor of individualism and the new social order wiping out old values such as sacrifice dooming the individual to meaningless life. In the 1960s, many Japanese filmmakers such as Oshima Nagisa, Wakamatsu Koji or Teshigahara Hiroshi already shared their concerns about this loss. For example, Wakamatsu's *Secrets behind the Wall* (1965) depicts the growing alienation of a teenager and an ordinary housewife who feel stuck inside the walls of a *danchi*, which used to be one of the main symbols of the Japanese new prosperity.

This presentation points at how this troubled period still impacts the generation of present filmmakers of Japan with the same concerns about identity and values issues within modernity like depicted by Mishima. In this order, Tsukamoto Shinya's *Tokyo Fist* (1995) and Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Tokyo Sonata* (2008) will be the main focus of this study.

Keywords: Japan, cinema, Tsukamoto, Kurosawa, Mishima, modernity, death

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The postwar Japan was subject to deep identity mutations as a result from the defeat and the social reforms often dictated by the American occupant. Only in 1951, Japan was free from occupation and initiated the postwar “Japanese miracle” especially anchored in the 1950s and the 1960s and emphasized by new economic prosperity and international reputation. And yet, starting from the 1960s, this feeling of defeat still endures as the contemporary Japan remains haunted by the consequences of social mutations resulted from the postwar period at the cost of tradition. Such a mutation that Mishima Yukio criticized in the 1960s.

Some examples argued by Mishima are the fall of patriarchal authority at the favor of individualism and the new social order wiping out old values such as sacrifice dooming the individual to meaningless life. This social upheaval has been observed in different ways within some Western modern societies on which Japan built its renewal. From Gilles Deleuze’s point of view, cinema as a reflection of modernity and society also did point at that crisis of individual within these modern societies by exposing it as the loss of the link between the man and the world.

In the 1960s, many Japanese filmmakers such as Oshima Nagisa, Wakamatsu Koji or Teshigahara Hiroshi already shared their concerns about this loss. For example, Wakamatsu’s *Secrets behind the Wall* (1965) depicts the growing alienation of a teenager and an ordinary housewife who feel stuck inside the walls of a *danchi*, which used to be one of the main symbols of the Japanese new prosperity.

Through this presentation, it will be demonstrated that this loss already observed in the 1960s still endure in contemporary Japan. That’s why it will especially focus on two movies from present filmmakers: *Tokyo Fist* (1995) by Tsukamoto Shinya and *Tokyo Sonata* (2008) by Kurosawa Kiyoshi. Both of these movies highlight this still fallen masculine authority resulting in a crisis of obsolete models. In that case, how is this figure depicted and in what way does that portrayal establish a present observation resulted from an unresolved postwar failure?

I. Tokyo Fist

Tokyo Fist follows the story of Tsuda, a common *salaryman* working for a health insurance company, living with his fiancé, Hizuru until he meets Kojima, a former friend from high school and member of a team of boxing. Kojima becomes more and more intrusive in Tsuda’s private life and even initiates a seduction game with Hizuru. Tsuda breaks to Kojima’s apartment and tries to hit him. Instead, Tsuda gets hardly punched by Kojima. At this point, Tsuda’s life gradually unravels. Hizuru who can no longer tolerate Tsuda’s jealousy and oppressive behavior leaves him. Seeking for revenge, Tsuda decides to join Kojima’s boxing club and train himself.



Figure 1: salaryman (Tokyo Fist, Tsukamoto Shinya, 1995)

In his first movies, Tsukamoto highlights the condition of Japanese man through two symbols of the new Japanese middle-class: the *salaryman* characterized by white-collar employees of the business corporations and government bureaucracies; the urban environment, especially through the *danchi*, the new residential complex, both of them referring to the prosperity and success inherited from postwar legacy.



Figure 2: *danchi* (*Tokyo Fist*)

Far from a picture of bright life, Tsukamoto depicts these symbols as the cogs of a rusty machine. In movies like *Tetsuo* and *Tetsuo II*, Tsukamoto portrays the *salaryman* as a man mechanized by an excessive modernized society at the point he turns himself into a being made of metal.



Figure 3: *salaryman* becomes metal (*Tetsuo*, Tsukamoto Shinya, 1989)

In this way, modern environment embodied by city inspires strong repulsion that characters express through brutal acts of violence. In *Coin Locker Babies*, published in 1995, novelist Murakami Ryu also relates similar condition through two men, Kiku and Hashi, abandoned by their mothers during infancy in coin lockers at Tokyo train station. As they grow up, the city where they live remains as a painful memory of the coin locker.

“The wrecking ball went on battering the building. But as his own skin broke into yet another sweat, something carefully hidden in him began to rise to the surface, and his fear from the night before changed to anger. With a sudden intensity, he was aware that he was shut up tight in a box of a room, that the heat was unbearable. He wondered how

long he had been here. Since the moment he was born, it seemed, sealed inside these gummy walls. And how long would he have to stay here? Until he too was a hard red doll draped in a sheet?”¹

The whole city is perceived a sort of concrete coffin, which evokes the coin locker in which the kids were abandoned. Another part of Murakami’s novel highlights the characters’ feeling of repulsion:

“It blows your mind, doesn’t it, a city? You feel yourself—your body, your mind—being worn down, the life being snapped out of you by the energy of the place. It’s that energy blows you away. Guess that’s the best way of putting it: that easy-come kind of pleasure that just sneaks up on you. But I don’t have to tell you any of this. There’s no getting around it, this sleek, crazy energy. Yeah, that’s not bad... ‘sleek, crazy’... right kind of words. It’s a sleek, crazy life; that’s me, that’s Tokyo... that’s you, kid.”²

In *Tokyo Fist*, Tsukamoto shares a similar state of mind in his perception of the city. Kojima’s violence is the way to express his repulsion against Tsuda as a figure of the city, the *salaryman*. By hitting Tsuda, Kojima expresses his urge to hit the city itself, to destroy its dehumanizing structures of glass and concrete. The opening of the movie gives a powerful illustration of this feeling through a picture of a fist raised in the middle of Tokyo’s buildings while the frame is shaken like if both camera and city were hammered. Eventually, the fist literally punches the eye of the camera, which blows up in pieces of flesh, revealing Kojima boxing in a dark room.



Figure 4: Iron fist (*Tokyo Fist*)

The depiction of fist and buildings on the same picture marks an association between body and steel as the fantasy of a man with the strength of steel. As a matter of fact, violence is conceived both as an extreme manifestation of repressed repulsion against the urban environment and a will to get back a long lost masculinity. Kojima’s intrusive behavior has no purpose but provoking Tsuda in the training sessions and that in order to initiate Tsuda into a new perception of his body as well as his identity. In postwar Japan, novelist Mishima Yukio was famous in reason of his political actions as well as his training sessions. In his opinion, there is a vital necessity in the training of this body through which he tends to rediscover Japanese identity. Mishima

¹ Murakami Ryû (1980). *Coin Locker Babies*. Paris, Editions Philippe Picquier. p.121

² *Ibid*, p.115

considered that modernization consecutive to defeat being a cause of disfigurement of the Japanese identity at the favor of Western influence.

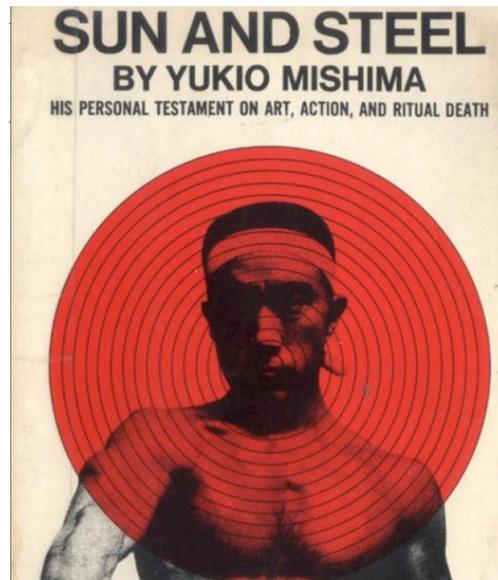


Figure 5: Cover of *Sun and Steel*, by Mishima Yukio

Tsukamoto is part of the generation of the 1980s and the 1990s which is said “apolitical” by contrast to the postwar generation of the 1960s represented by highly subversive filmmakers like Ôshima Nagisa. However, Tsukamoto describes similar crisis of masculinity as a latent consequence of the defeat and the modernization of Japanese society. Indeed, on several occasions, Tsukamoto makes connection between sterile urban environment embodied by Tokyo and decrepitude of human being living in there. This connection is especially symbolized through Tsuda’s father, reflection of this fallen patriarchal figure lying on a bed in hospital before eventually vanishing when his son comes to pay a visit. Through the vanishing of his father, Tsuda faces his own destiny that Baudrillard calls “the worst repression, which consists in dispossessing you of your own death, which everybody dreams of, as the darkness beneath their instinct of conservation”.

“We are all hostages, and that's the secret of hostage-taking, and we are all dreaming, instead of dying stupidly working oneself to the ground, of receiving death and of giving death. Giving and receiving constitute one symbolic act (the symbolic act par excellence), which rids death of all the indifferent negativity it holds for us in the 'natural' order of capital”.³

Many pictures showing Tsuda surrounded by the walls of these buildings accentuate this description of the city as a prison where he is dispossessed of his life as well as his death. In this way, boxing training provide him the possibility to take back his life by taking possession of his death, like Mishima did. There is no other purpose to build a body of steel but in the perspective of one finale act of destruction. It is a necessary

³ Baudrillard Jean (1999). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Trans. Iain Hhamilton Grant. London: Sage. p.166

destruction to prevent the body from inevitable decay and to give a meaning to the death through the value of sacrifice.



Figure 6: Tsuda surrounded by “panoptical” buildings (*Tokyo Fist*)

II. Tokyo Sonata

The value of sacrifice is depicted in a different and more subtle way in Kurosawa’s *Tokyo Sonata*. The movie focuses on Sasaki family, composed of the father Ryuhei, the mother Megumi and their two sons, Takashi and Kenji. At the beginning of the movie, Ryuhei quits his job – but it is not clearly established if he was fired or if he just resigned. In spite of his situation, Ryuhei hides the truth from his family and keeps acting as if nothing happened. Ryuhei embodies the failure of the paternal authority at the favor of a meaningless figure, a simulacrum, a fake pretending to be true. The familial diner time frames the family through handrail which isolates and confines every member of the family in an individual space. The father tries to maintain the illusion of a unity founded on the simulacrum of his role-playing.



Figure 7: The family’s members shattered and isolated. On the left, Midori and Kenji. On the right, Ryuhei and Takashi (*Tokyo Sonata*, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, 2008)

By contrast to the fallen father, Takashi embodies the Japanese youth urging to break up with the paternal simulacrum. Takashi’s wish is to leave this family to join the American Army. His father expresses his disagreement and refuses to let his son leave the house. In regard of all the sacrifices he made for the sake of his family, Ryuichi considers this departure as a failure of his paternal role. However Takashi answers “What am I supposed to do? Dad, you say that you protect us, but every day, what do you do? You don’t even answer to that”. Through this delusion, Takashi joins American Army for two symbolic reasons. First, he considers that American Army protects Japan, not his father. Indirectly, he points the simulacrum of the father

through a simulacrum from postwar period that Murakami Haruki wrote in a correspondence with Murakami Ryu. Murakami evokes a memory when he was told that Japan is the only country refusing to involve in war. However, he got a deep delusion when facing a different reality in which Japan has an army.

Secondly, Takashi's decision is a way to prove himself as a man and, in that way, chooses a path "of courage, of, of abnegation" towards life which is one characteristic from *bushido*, the way of the samurai, that Mishima used to praise in his novels at the point he will set his own death by *seppuku* in 1970 after a failed attempted coup.

In that way, Takashi leaves his family by following a kamikaze-like path, "Gods' wind", "divine typhoon", who didn't expect "any promise of reward nor heaven", only young people with no illusion of return nor victory but a "syllogism of voluntary death"⁴. At the end of the movie, Megumi receives a letter from Takashi which relates his recent experiences alongside the American Army. The letter is read by Takashi's voice-over like the voice of a ghost whose words and will echo some kamikazes' writings before their finale travel. Maurice Pinguet quotes one of those young men named Sasaki Hachirô:

"I wish to dedicate all my energy to living my life as a man according to the decrees of destiny. This is my state of mind. Shouldn't we, each other, accept the destiny set for us since the day of our birth; shouldn't we work with all our energy, fight with all our energy, every one of us on the path which has been set for us? This is my state of mind. Flee this path which has been traced to us by quibbling is cowardice. Let's decide of the fate of the weapons in conformity with the decrees of Heaven by choosing to follow the path which has been allowed to us [...]. I want to live as a man among others, until the end, humanly, without cowardice"⁵

III. Conclusion

Tokyo Fist and *Tokyo Sonata* portray masculine figures as legacy from postwar period and defeat. Symbols of success associated to the modernized city and embodied through the figure of the *salaryman* are depicted as simulacra at the edge of collapse. The modernization of Japan was the cause of a crisis of identity and values. Such values like the patriarchal authority and the sacrifice were just wiped out under the Western influence. In the following years of the defeat, filmmakers and intellectuals such as Mishima Yukio highly protested against this loss of values which still endures in the contemporary Japan. This loss of values echoes what Pasolini said in the Italy of the 1970 that is the vanishing of a culture precedes the literal vanishing of the individual. In that way, the cinema of Tsukamoto and Kurosawa illustrate the long-term consequences of this loss through meaningless figures of modernization destined to rot and to disappear. Tsukamoto portrays characters modeling new body in an attempt to rebuild their identity and destroy the simulacra of the society while Kurosawa just watches these same simulacra slowly dying. Belief in a bright future inherited from the Japanese postwar miracle fails to prevent its expiration.

⁴ Pinguet Maurice (1984). *Voluntary Death in Japan*. Paris: Gallimard. p.254

⁵ *Ibid*, p.259

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