

Age Difference: Women in Japanese and American Film

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The female body on the screen was defined by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975)¹ as an object of the voyeuristic-scopophilic gaze of the male. Woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, with man being bearer of the look, has since been centered on in feminist film theory, and has triggered film criticisms by Mary Ann Doan, Lucy Fischer, E. Ann Kaplan, Tania Modleski, Constance Penley, and Kaja Silverman. The isolation of sexual difference, however, can mask other kinds of difference – such as racial, cultural, and class difference. Aware of this shortcoming, recent feminist film scholarship brings these kinds of difference into consideration, as is done by *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, a critical anthology of feminist film analyses published in 1994.² The anthology devotes a half of the whole chapters to the argument of these differences, while *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, an anthology published four years earlier, exclusively concerns itself with gender relations.³

Despite these recent efforts to incorporate various differences in film analysis, however, one significant difference has never been examined. It is age difference. Age functions as a determining factor in the representation of women; female bodies of different ages are projected differently on the screen. I will map difference in representations between young and middle-aged women, a difference which is universally seen in films of the East (Japan) and the West (America), and which emphasizes the physical and sexual superiority of young female bodies to shrinking bodies of middle-aged women. I will, at the same time, explore how Japanese film sharply swerves from its American counterpart, by analyzing a peculiarly

Japanese, culturally constructed way of treating middle-aged women. To distinguish these two conflicting but coexisting representations of middle-aged women in Japanese film, I will begin with a comparative analysis of Japanese and American films of the 1950s, the time when the increasing emphasis on sexuality broadens a fissure between young and middle-aged women.

The Age of Forty in American Film

Dealing with the lives of five prostitutes in Yoshiwara, Tokyo, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Street of Shame/Akasen Chitai* (1956) gives a straightforward value judgment of young and middle-aged prostitutes through the mouth of a male client: "A man likes to buy a fresh fish rather than an old one. It's up to him who buys." Prostitutes as commodities are compared to fish and are chosen by freshness or youth. Older prostitutes are replaced by young, fresh ones. The arrival of young Mickey (Machiko Kyo) at a brothel triggers the male client to reject his formerly favorite prostitute, Yorie, as "baba-a" (old woman). Enraged to discover her client making advances to Mickey, Yorie throws barrets into a bath in which he soaks himself. The camera then frames her, drawn up to her full height as she threatens to throw a barret at the wet and frightened man who has just escaped offscreen. Behind this monstrous middle-aged woman gracefully stands young and beautiful Mickey to emphasize the contrast between the two women of different ages (Figure 1). In the following sequence, where all three characters meet to settle the matter, Yorie silently droops her head in the background of the frame, while the male client bombards her with humiliating words. Meanwhile, Mickey occupies the center of the foreground, sitting at a dressing table and triumphantly putting on make-up (Figure 2). The sequence clearly illustrates the victory of young Mickey over middle-aged Yorie in their sexual battle.

The degrading treatment of middle-aged women is not peculiar to Japanese film but is seen in American film as well. *Picnic* (1955) directed by Joshua Logan, an American film contemporary of *Street of Shame*, has



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4

a climactic sequence informed by the same plotline of sexual battle between two women of different ages. Young Madge (Kim Novak) enters the frame, and slowly descends the stair, as the camera gradually zooms in on her (Figures 3-6). The camera follows her moving body in medium close-up shots as she dances with Hal (William Holedn), their hands slightly touching and their eyes riveted to each other. The camera then shoots their dance from among the high tree branches, positioning the couple (or strictly, Madge the young woman) in the center. In contrast, the middle-aged female schoolteacher and her male friend are pushed off to the left corner, barely visible through the branches (Figure 7). The centrality of the young woman is reinforced by the camera's succeeding close-ups of the young dancing couple from the chest up, leaving the middle-aged couple completely out of the frame (Figures 8-10). When cutting to



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7

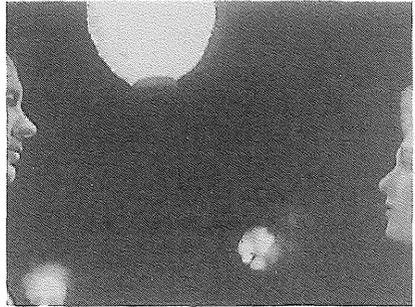


Fig 8

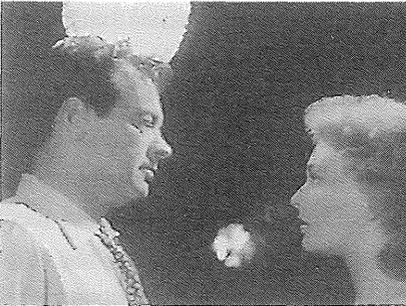


Fig 9



Fig 10

the middle-aged couple, the camera shows the schoolteacher tottering dancing in a disharmonized movement of legs and hands (Figure 11). The camera goes so far as to show her miserably clinging to Hal, begging him



Fig 11



Fig 12

to dance with her, and eventually rips his shirt right off his back. With her head drooped, her back bent, and her throat sagged flabby, she is intended to look ugly and aged (Figure 12). When advised by her friend not to meddle with the young couple, she raises her eyebrows and shouts: "Young? What do you mean by 'young'?" She knows very well that, because she is no longer young and therefore disadvantaged, she cannot win Hal. Like Yorie in *Street of Shame*, the meddle-aged schoolteacher is bound to lose her sexual battle with a young rival.

Picnic defines the age of "forty" as an indication of middle-age. In a dialogue between Madge and her mother in front of a large dressing mirror, the mother tells the daughter to seize "her chance when she is young." Madge protests that she is "only nineteen," to which the mother gives an interesting vision of the span of woman's life: "And next summer, you'll be twenty, and then twenty-one, and then forty." The daughter startles to hear the reference to the age of "forty," and chides the mother not to "be morbid." Forty is the frightening age which is no longer "young" and is indicative of the loss of physical attraction as a woman.

There is another significant reference to the age of forty in *All About Eve* (1950), a film about a middle-aged female actor being replaced by a young woman. Margo Channing (Bette Davis) is not jealous of the talent of Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) but of her youth and femininity. The emphasis is on age, not on professional ability. Margo is forty years old, the age that Madge's mother believes would be indicative of the death of

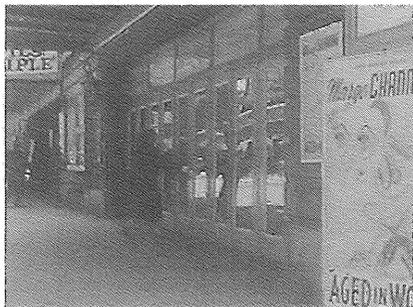


Fig 13



Fig 14

womanhood. Margo cannot get rid of her age obsession and shouts: “Three months ago, I was forty years old, forty, four-oh.” What she bitterly realizes (or is made to realize by the director, Joseph Mankiewicz) is that, at her age, she is losing qualities intrinsic to “being a woman,” the qualities that young Eve possesses — such as being “so young, so feminine, and so helpless.” The age of forty works, here too, as a reminder of the lost youth and femininity.

The camera almost subliminally implants in the spectator’s consciousness an association of the word “aged” with Margo. When she gets off a car in front of a theatre, for example, Margo is pictured with a large advertising billboard, on which are painted the enormous letters, “AGED” (Figure 13). A moment later, she is pictured, from another angle, against another large billboard with the letters “AGED” noticeably written on it (Figure 14). Margo is thus repeatedly associated as an “aged” woman.

Margo’s “aged” body is eventually replaced by Eve’s young body in the sequence that shows Eve, not Margo, winning the Best Actress award. This final replacement is reiteratively foreshadowed by the skillful *mise en scène* and montage throughout the film. The sequence of the first meeting of Margo and Eve begins with a scene in which Margo, surrounded by her friends, attracts all their attentions to herself (Figure 15). This privileged position of Margo is immediately appropriated by Eve, soon after the latter gets a seat and begins her own story. Eve is now framed in the center with the other characters as an audience, with Margo



Fig 15



Fig 16



Fig 17



Fig 18

reduced to a mere auditor (Figure 16). The reversal of the positions of the two women is more strikingly shown by two symmetrical shots, placed at and after Margo's performance on a stage. In the first shot, Margo greets the audience from a stage, while Eve, on the left behind the curtains, jealously looks on (Figure 17). In the second shot, however, it is Eve who holds tightly against her body the stage dress that Margo was wearing a moment ago, and who stands in front of a mirror, imitating Margo by greeting an imagined audience (Figure 18). When Margo is copied by Eve, the role previously played by Eve is now assigned to Margo; Margo, on the right, stares at Eve. The reversal of the spatial positioning of their bodies anticipates the final inversion of their power relations.

Margo eventually disappears from the screen, with her last words portraying the fate of middle-aged woman: "It [marriage] means I've fi-

nally got a life to live.” A middle-aged woman is expected to be conscious of her age and to seek a hiding place for her shrinking, unpleasant body. A hiding place is often sought in the arms of a man, as Margo’s action shows.

But a middle-aged woman does not always gain a man, no matter how devoted or subservient she is to him. Milo (Nina Foch), a wealthy middle-aged woman in Vincente Minnelli’s *An American in Paris* (1951), funds Jerry (Gene Kelly) so that he may become successful as a painter, but all she gets from him is a cruel confession that he loves Lise (Leslie Caron), a young woman. The film ends climactically with exultant music and a dramatic embrace of Jerry and Lise, who beam with joy. The spectator never sees Milo after Jerry confesses his love for Lise. The middle-aged woman is forgotten, and her misery neglected.

Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is another wealthy middle-aged woman, who is rejected by the man she loves. She offers Joe (William Holden) a luxurious life in her house but is refused. Her face grotesquely deformed with shock (Figure 19), she murders him in panic. Surrounded by reporters later, she, mentally deranged, poses as if she were an actor, slowly descending the stair, regarding the reporters as an audience in a theater. Her eyebrows are raised, and her lips parted. This twitching and grimacing face slowly approaches the camera in close-up, eventually fading out (Figures 20-22). Represented as monstrous and grotesque, the female middle-aged bodies are thus eventually removed from the screen. Such a fate is shared by Branche (Vivien Leigh) in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), whose middle-age is emphasized in contrast with the health and youth of her sister, Stella (Kim Hunter). If the middle-aged female bodies remain on the screen at all, they are to be reduced to lumps of flesh innocuous to others, as in the case of Martha (Elisabeth Taylor) in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966).



Fig 19



Fig 20

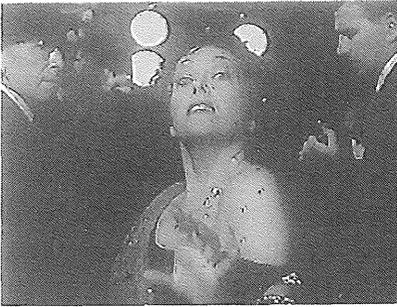


Fig 21

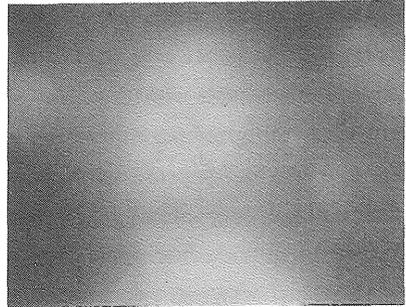


Fig 22

Middle-Age and Youth in Japanese Film

The idea behind the representation of middle-aged female bodies as monstrous and fated to be replaced by younger, pleasant bodies is a universal myth that aging deprives people of sexual, physical attraction.⁴ It is no wonder that all middle-aged female characters in the American films that I have been discussing reveal their age obsession.

It is true that to become sexually less attractive is referred to as one of the physical aspects of getting old in Japanese film, too. But the physical decline is not given first priority. The sexual emphasis seen in American film gives way, in Japanese film, to a peculiarly Japanese cultural institution – seniority. Japanese seniority as an institution provides people with rights and privileges on the basis of age, giving older people priority

over younger people. “No matter how democratic and uniform it may seem, any community [in Japan] has an order, which all its members — if they are Japanese — can immediately accept as reasonable,” states Chie Nakane in a sequel to her best-selling *Japanese Society*.⁵ “That order,” she continues, “represents a vertical culture which holds higher value on courtesy than on ability or power.”⁶ Nakane agrees with her interviewer that Japanese society resembles a community of a certain type of crows, which line up according to their age, with the oldest in the lead.⁷ Though Nakane states that there are various factors to determine an order in a community, age can be the most fundamental determinant of the order. As Nakane herself comments, “To become No.1 is to be the oldest. The older, the better, if one wishes to be at the top.”⁸ It is true that, in the Japanese business world, rank is mostly based on age, and one is promoted to a higher position with a higher salary as s/he gets older. Salaries for university professors in Japan, for example, are determined solely by their age, and not at all by their academic achievements. So too with the world outside business. Age plays a significant role in determining a relationship between two (or more) people: the older must be respected by the younger. Whether inside or outside business, the order based on age — seniority — provides a basis for determining human relationships in Japan.

The battle between two women of different ages in *Street of Shame*, with which I began this essay, is interrupted when it becomes clear that the middle-aged woman is to lose the battle. The film thereupon swerves from the American scenario of the triumph of a young woman over a middle-aged one, and saves the older woman from being put to shame. In other words, seniority is observed. Instead of revealing the loss of middle-aged Yorie, the film develops a new theme, altogether unrelated to the women’s battle — a theme of prostitution as the cause of human misery. Depressed in bed and advised by her fellow prostitute not to “be too mad at Mickey,” Yorie clarifies that it is not Mickey but prostitution itself that makes her miserable: “It’s not that. I’m fed up with this work.” Yorie is encouraged to quit the job and is given a farewell party by all the other prostitutes, including Mickey. When Yorie gratefully says, “I have

never been so happy before," the spectator witnesses a sisterhood between Yorie and other women, including Mickey. The director Kenji Mizoguchi could have developed the women's battle with a perfect defeat of middle-aged Yorie, but seniority was too deeply rooted in his mind to be disrupted.

Even a film depicting the triumph of the young over the middle-aged tactfully follows the code of seniority. Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Snesees/Ai no Corrida* (1976) concerns rich and middle-aged Kichi (Tatsuya Fuji), his middle-aged wife (Aoi Nakajima), and a young maid, Sada (Eiko Matsuda), who works in their house. The film is based on an actual incident in which Sada, having stolen her master away from his wife, completes her victory by strangling him and cutting off his genitals in ecstasy. The filmic plot of Sada's victory over the middle-aged wife is, as it were, pre-determined and unchangeable. The film adopts, however, a strategy with which to make the obvious loss of the middle-aged woman less visible. The camera carefully avoids shooting confrontations between the two women; it never frames them together once Sada starts her affair with Kichi. Soon after she has become Kichi's mistress, Sada asks the wife to permit her to quit her job as their maid. Her words are full of respect for the older woman: "Excuse me, Mistress. I'm sorry to disturb you... I'm grateful for your kindness, but feel unworthy of your trust. I'd like permission to leave here." She leaves the house in a comfortable and pleasant way, and both women never see each other.

Kichi keeps Sada in a room in an inn, frequently visiting her there. Two women are carefully separated in space. There is only one occasion of tension between the two women after Sada's move to the inn. A window at Kichi's house is stoned while he is asleep with his wife. When the wife murmurs "I know who it is... that whore of yours, watching us," the camera quickly cuts to Sada hiding herself outside. The two women's confrontation, however, does not ensue, for the camera decisively avoids not only framing the two women in a single shot but shooting at all the middle-aged woman after the sequence of Sada's stoning Kichi's house. The spectator is deprived of a chance to see the middle-aged woman's re-

actions to Sada's gradually acquired power over Kichi. The visual presentation of the two women's competition is completely eliminated from the screen out of respect for the middle-aged woman, whose bitter loss is therefore hidden from the eyes of the spectator. Both *Street of Shame* and *In the Realm of the Senses* thus avoid depicting an older woman's loss to a younger one, whether swerving a filmic plot from the usual scenario of the women's battle, or eliminating all shots of a losing, older woman.

In the perspective of the male gaze, the fact that Sada emasculates Kichi is a strong signal of the horror of allowing younger women to supercede older ones. If younger women can displace older ones, then male authority must soon be undermined as well. Seniority system functions, in a sense, as a defense of a male-dominated culture against an emasculating threat embodied by young women. Seniority parallels, to a certain degree, patriarchal authority.

Mother and Daughter-in-law in *Onibaba*

Seniority is sometimes explicitly and vigorously represented in Japanese film. Kaneto Shindo's *Onibaba* (1961) is a film of two women, a middle-aged mother and her daughter-in-law, eking out a living in the sixteenth century medieval Japan during the civil war period. "A triangle of sexual jealousy"⁹ develops between the older woman (Nobuko Otowa) and the younger (Jitsuko Yoshimura) over their neighbor, Hachi (Kei Sato). The intrusion of Hachi into a circle of the two women brings forth a change, and the film superficially follows our familiar scenario of the young triumphing over the middle-aged. The pleasure of the film, however, does not come from the liaison between the daughter and Hachi, but mainly from the way seniority initially held between mother and daughter is subverted only to reveal another aspect of the stubbornly held seniority. The film, in a sense, shows how firmly seniority is established between mother and daughter, seniority that is not easily undermined, even though the young woman is certainly given a predominant position.

The mother and the daughter do not have names, and are referred to,



Fig 23



Fig 24

respectively, by “middle-aged woman” and “young woman” in the script. In the film, they are called respectively by general pronouns, “baba-a” and “yome.” “Baba-a” means an old woman, and makes a part of the title of the film, “Oni-Baba,” which is compound from “oni” (demon) and “baba” (a formal expression of the colloquial “baba-a”). “Yome” is loosely translated as “daughter-in-law,” but in fact signifies a woman married to one’s son and regarded as a property of the house. Yome belongs to Baba, being reduced to a property of the former. It is in fact this relationship of owner/owned, primary/secondary, center/periphery, and high/low that the film establishes in the opening sequence for the two women. There is no dialogue. The camera captures Baba pushing the reeds aside to reveal her face, and a few seconds later shoots Yome exactly copying the act of her mother-in-law (Figures 23-24). They start stripping the dead samurai of armor and swords, intending to sell the plundered items. The camera inaugurates a series of shots of Baba and Yome in turns, first framing Baba, cutting to Yome who immediately copies Baba’s act, and cutting back to Baba, then to Yome, once more to Baba, and to Yome (Figures 25-32). When they return home after the plunder, it is again Baba who drinks water from a picher first (Figure 33). The act of drinking water is copied by Yome as soon as she is given the pitcher by Baba (Figure 34). The succeeding eating scene is shot in the same manner: Baba starts devouring millet first. The spectator, by this time, must have become realized that the camera not only shows that the two women follow the insti-



Fig 25



Fig 26

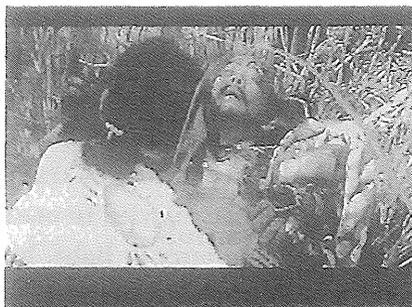


Fig 27



Fig 28



Fig 29



Fig 30

tution of seniority but itself observes such an institution by always shooting Baba first.

The visually established seniority is confirmed verbally. The way in



Fig 31



Fig 32



Fig 33



Fig 34

which the two women communicate to each other clarifies that it is Baba who tells Yome what to do. When Hachi offers fish to Yome, she does not take it immediately but, turning towards Baba, waits for words of command or advice. As soon as Baba says, “Better take what’s offered,” Yome grabs the fish.

The so far established power relations between the two women, however, is destabilized by the male gaze introduced by Hachi. The camera emphasizes such a gaze by frequently cutting from a close-up shot of Hachi’s lustful countenance to a close-up shot of a bodily part of Yome — her breasts (figures 35-36) or her hip (figures 37-38). Yome is desired by the male gaze but Baba, in contrast, is completely rejected by the bearer of such a gaze. With the intention to seduce him, Baba exposes her legs to Hachi only to be disgusted by him. With his eyes decisively closed, he



Fig 35



Fig 36

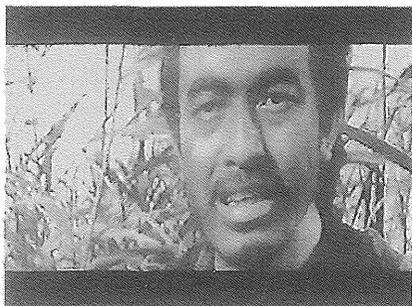


Fig 37



Fig 38

refuses even to look at her (Figures 39-40). Baba, however, is not discouraged by such male preference, and succeeds in frightening Yome away from Hachi by adopting a demon-mask and standing between Yome and Hachi's home. The frightened young woman crouches on the floor at home in the dark, and is hypocritically pitied by the middle-aged woman, who, in glittering white clothes, towers large and bright at the center of the frame, as if she alone were a protagonist of this story (Figure 41).

Baba's dominance is subverted, however, when the mask sticks to her face. The dialogue and spatial positioning of the two women begin to show that the young woman now takes the status of superior/strong and the middle-aged woman, inferior/weak. Being terrified by the stuck demon-mask and entreating Yome to help her remove it, the middle-aged woman is shown, only her head up, at the bottom of a frame, clinging to



Fig 39



Fig 40

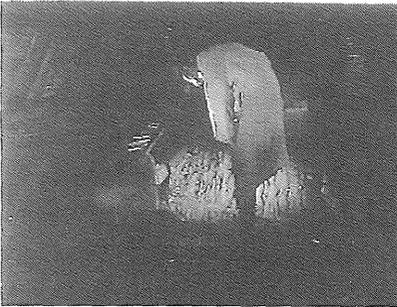


Fig 41



Fig 42

Yome, who is seen towering large (Figures 42-43). The superb shot representative of the subversion of their power relations positions the dignified young woman's head at the top left corner looking down at the trembling middle-aged woman, whose masked head sinks at the bottom right corner of the frame (Figure 44). The positioning of the middle-aged and young women at the bottom and top respectively is deliberate, and is succeeded by a series of equally deliberate shots to confirm their newly spatially defined relationship. It is maintained until the demon-mask comes off from the middle-aged woman to reveal her deformed, monstrous face.

Such an identification of the middle-aged woman with a monster may remind us of the American representation of women over forty as unfeminine, undesirable creatures fated to be defeated by younger women. But the monstrously deformed face of Baba in *Onibaba* curiously fails to indi-



Fig 43

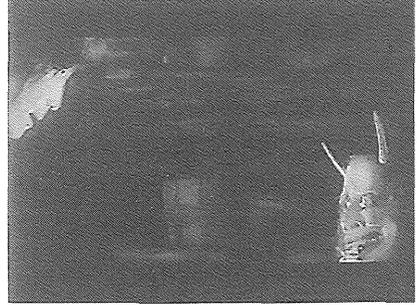


Fig 44

cate her loss to young Yome, for the very deformed face puts Yome to flight as a frightened creature chased by Baba. The film ends with Baba the stronger (chaser) and Yome the weaker (chased), resuming the initial power relations. The director himself emphasizes his intention to use the deformed face positively so that it would trigger the middle-aged woman's redemption or her "spiritual" rebirth "into a new world," though Shindo does not explain how such a deformation could redeem Baba.¹⁰ It would not occur in American film that an unfavorable value (the deformed face) of the already unfavored middle-aged woman could be expressive of something positive and desirable. Shindo even tries mysteriously to identify the middle-aged woman with himself, saying "the mother is myself.... I am Onibaba."¹¹ His favorable treatment of the deformed middle-aged woman might not make sense, if the spectator were unaware of seniority system so deeply rooted in the Japanese sensibility.

Aunt and Niece in *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice*

Always evident in Japanese film, seniority cannot be easily undermined. A female-male relationship is much more easily transformed. We can witness how quickly, in Japanese film, a willful, arrogant wife transforms into a pleasant woman obedient to her husband. Yasujiro Ozu's *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice/Ochazuke no Aji* (1953) can be analyzed as an example of films that represent an easily modifiable female-male re-

lationship on the one hand, and a strictly observed seniority system on the other. Taeko is introduced as a willful female protagonist, who detests her husband and acts against him. Such a shrew can be transformed into an obedient wife, but she is expected to remain predominant over her niece. I will first illustrate the change brought about to Takeo in relation to her husband, and then clarify her unchanged attitude towards the young niece.

Taeko's transformation becomes obvious when we compare two dining sequences placed, respectively, in the middle and the end of the film. In the first dining sequence, the camera mostly shoots, over the wife's shoulder, the way the husband eats. He faces, and is observed by, the wife, who sits motionlessly with her back towards the camera (Figure 45). As the husband is the only character in motion, the spectator's attention is drawn to his peculiar way of eating, that is, pouring miso soup over a bowl of rice and noisily washing it down. The wife suddenly tells him not to eat rice such a way, for the rice mixed with liquid is nothing but a "dog food." The camera then cuts to her fierce, angry face in a close-up shot, followed by a series of shots/countershots of the wife and the husband, with her relentless questioning: "Do you always eat like that?"; "Do you always eat the way a dog dose?"; "Didn't I tell you that I hate to see that way of eating?" The husband stops eating and promises her not to eat that way any more. But she angrily stands up and walks away when he resumes eating more noisily than before. He seems to do so undeliberately, but in that apparent undeliberateness is hidden the typical Japanese male stubbornness, which eventually subjugates the female to his way of life. That the camera provides the spectator with the wife's point of view by mostly viewing the husband from her side seems to give the audience a chance to observe his stubbornness.

The second dining sequence takes place after the husband unexpectedly returns home due to engine trouble. The wife is there at home, prepared to accept him, whom she previously detested and called "dumb bell." Her transformation from a defiant shrew to an agreeable housewife repenting her former behavior is presented without explanation. As soon

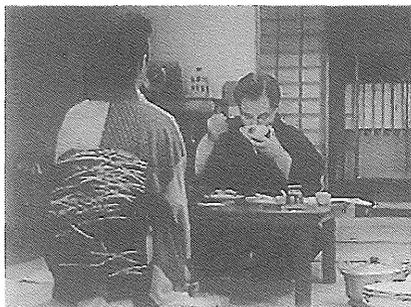


Fig 45



Fig 46

as he returns home to his now tamed wife, he wishes to eat *ochazuke*, a simple meal of green tea poured over a bowl of rice — a variation of what the wife calls “dog food” in the first dining sequence. Though it turns out to be difficult to find rice at midnight, when the household servants are asleep, the husband insists on eating *ochazuke*, rejecting his wife’s suggestions: “How about bread?” “How about this?” This obstinacy of the husband is usually unnoticed, being overshadowed by the wife’s conspicuous willfulness, but it is there nonetheless and forms the core of the Japanese male characteristics portrayed in film. A beautiful shot of the wife projected in silhouette on the white paper sliding screen, carrying the rice pot from the kitchen to the dining room for her husband (Figure 46), is probably indicative of an “ideal” image of an obedient wife for the Japanese male in the 1950s. Unlike the first dining sequence, the second sequence presents a medium long frontal shot of the wife, which allows the spectator to observe her diligently serving *ochazuke* to her husband (Figure 47).

The wife not only accepts the husband’s habit of eating rice with green tea (occasionally replaced by miso soup) but tries it herself for the first time in her life. The husband confirms that a married life should be what *ochazuke* symbolizes — simplicity without pretense. The *ochazuke* may symbolize such a quality for him, but it symbolizes vulgarity for the wife until she is transformed. She comes to abandon her own value system to accept her husband’s, that is, his way of thinking and living. Declaring that she will no longer have her own way, she puts herself in a

proper place for a wife of the 1950s — not a rebel against a husband but an obedient servant.

Such a fantastic transformation of middle-aged Taeko in relation to her husband makes an interesting contrast to her never changing attitude towards a younger woman, her twenty-two-year old niece. The shot of the two women sitting side by side in a cab, which begins the film, makes it clear that their positioning in space gives preference to the older woman. The aunt is given the seat on the side of the cab's exit door, and the seat given to the niece is farther from it and therefore requires more troublesome movement as she gets in and out. The senior is given a better place. Not only their positioning in space but their dialogue, too, inscribes seniority, allowing the older to patronize the younger. The aunt speaks to her niece in the imperative mode: "Go there [to a movie theater] alone"; "Why don't you call on Aya with me? Come with me." It is not only in the opening sequence but throughout the entire film that the aunt speaks in this way to her niece. Even after her transformation in relation to the husband, Takeo preserves the imperative mode when addressing herself to the niece: "Stay here a little longer." The niece, on the other hand, always uses the polite, honorific forms of words with her aunt. The patronizing attitude of the aunt towards her niece is well expressed by the following phrase: "You don't understand because you are still a kid." The word "kid" is what Margo hates to use for Eve, because Eve is a threatening rival in their sexual competition for Bill. Margo actually stops Bill from calling Eve "a kid."

Taeko never appears to be threatened by her niece. Her dignity and predominance is spatially confirmed by the camera work. In a Japanese-style inn at a hot spa resort, visited by the aunt, her niece, and two other women, the camera shoots the four women lined up along a window. The women are framed in a frontal medium shot, as they enjoy looking at a carp pond right outside their room. The niece inconspicuously occupies the left corner, sitting on the doorsill, while the aunt towers up high and occupies the summit of a beautiful triangle formed by the four women (Figure 48). The middle-aged woman in short is expected to take a



Fig 47



Fig 48

double-edged attitude: to stay obedient and inferior to her husband and to take, at the same time, a superior attitude towards a younger woman due to seniority.

The seniority system is ultimately reinscribed even by a film that purports to reject it. Kei Ota's *Ready! Lady / Redi! Redi* (1989) presents two female protagonists, an aunt and her niece, who act like friends. In the drinking sequence, they wear pajamas of the same design and color, and occupy the same amount of filmic space and time. Age seems not to come into consideration. But if we compare this film with *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice*, where we also have an aunt and her niece, we will notice that seniority is in fact more deeply conceived in this film of the 80s than that of the 50s. Seniority is clearly inscribed in the characterization of the two women: the middle-aged woman has high social status and full responsibility, while the young woman is homeless, jobless, moneyless and needs her aunt's protection.

“Obatalians” or Women over Forty in Japanese Film

A woman over forty, to whom privileges are granted by Japanese culture, has been parodically represented by a shameless, fearless, willful, unsexy female figure called “Obatalian.” The advent of the “Obatalian” figure and the quick and wide circulation of the term in everyday life was a singular phenomenon in the 1980s, when the power of middle-aged women

was recognized as a threat to social establishments. Having received a grand prize in Japanese vogue words in 1989, "Obatalian" was a coinage of Mrs. "Obata" and a monster called "Batalian." It originated in the best-selling series of comic strips by Katsuhiko Hotta, *Obatalian*, which were animated in 1990 under the same title. The idea behind this compounded word — a middle-aged woman as a monster — was nothing new. It has been expressed again and again in film, not only in American films such as *Picnic*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *All About Eve*, but also in Japanese films to a certain degree, as we have seen in Kenji Mizoguchi's *Street of Shame* and Kaneto Shindo's *Onibaba*. Those films portray middle-aged women rejected by men in favor of younger women, thus reinforcing the myth that young women are better than their middle-aged counterparts.

An Obatalian is not an exception; she is unfavorably depicted, with an emphasis on her middle-age and ugly looks. The physical change from beautiful youth to the plumpness of middle-age is presented in the opening sequence (Figures 49-52), during which the voice-over sings: "She was beautiful and kind in her youth, but she has become a different person before one knows.... She used to be a shy, beautiful wife. What on earth changed her?" It is aging that changed her. The sole basis on which to decide who is an Obatalian is age: a woman over the age "forty" (with a variation of "thirty" and "thirty-five") is called by that title. The Obatalian is a crystallization of the popular myth that aging devastates and devalues women, and references to the decline of womanhood are repeated throughout the film *Obatalian*.

The strength of Mrs. Obata, the most prominent Obatalian, however, is that she is not the least conscious of her age, even though other characters try to remind her of her middle-age and ugly appearance. In the fifth episode, Mrs. Obata is advised by her high-school daughter to realize her own fat, ugly looks. The daughter places a large mirror in front of her mother, complaining: "Why don't you look at yourself?... You are so fatty. Compare your body with mine." Mrs. Obata looks at her own image, and satisfactorily concludes that it is presumptuous for the daughter to compare her premature body with her own ripe body. Mrs. Obata can-



Fig 49



Fig 50



Fig 51

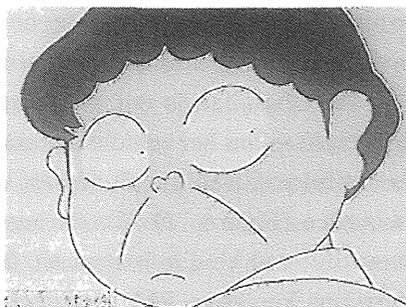


Fig 52

not be manipulated through what has been regarded as the typical womanly fear — the fear of aging.

Obatalians have a peculiar way of thinking, which does not follow the normal or accepted line of reasoning. In an episode in which she learns to drive, Mrs. Obata reveals an inordinate process of decision-making as she acquires her driver's license and a new car. She buys a magnet with the design of yellow and green leaves — required of a beginning driver to put on her/his car for one year — at a bargain of seventy percent off the regular price. Being satisfied with this discounted purchase, Mrs. Obata decides not to let the magnet go to waste; the magnet should be appropriately attached to a car as a symbol of a beginning driver. She therefore starts going to a driving school to get a driver's license. The beginner's magnet does not cost more than 5 dollars, while attending a driving school

would cost at least 4,000 dollars. She subverts the established value scale, by attaching more significance to a supplement or marginality than to a main body or centrality.

When buying a car, Mrs. Obata adopts the same Obatalian way of thinking. In a car shop, she does not look at cars much, instead scrutinizing the free gifts that come with the purchase of each automobile. She then chooses her car based on the gifts that come with it. She does not care how expensive the car itself is, but wants to get the gifts, for they are, in effect, discounted at a hundred percent off. She ventures new things and expands the horizon of her world, by being obsessed with discount offers and free gifts. Special offers are, as it were, the means by which Obatalians make themselves bigger and stronger.

Obatalians represent a subversion of the established, accepted hierarchy in society, by being obsessed with discount offers and free gifts. One Obatalian may not be a threat to society. But the Obatalian subversive intent is contagious, as is seen in the episode of Mrs. Obata's descent into hell. Mrs. Obata dies and is thrown into hell, which is represented as a society strictly regulated by men. Sinners there are forced to engage in heavy labor. Mrs. Obata does not, however, observe the rule but tries to avoid the assigned labor. When she is ordered to make a rice ball for each one of the numerous inhabitants of hell, she instead makes only one gigantic ball of rice and rolls it down a mountain, shouting "Here you are! Food!" The devils are almost crushed by the enormous rice ball dashing towards them with accelerating velocity. Mrs. Obata's credo of not paying full, regular price or providing full labor unnecessarily is accepted by other sinners, who are led by her to organize a kind of labor union to ask for four meals a day, two-day off a week, and other benefits. Mrs. Obata eventually throws hell into confusion, proving that her way of thinking is contagious. The devils finally drive Mrs. Obata out of hell to restore their patriarchal domination, but it is probably too late as each sinner is now a replica of Mrs. Obata. The battalion of Obatalians could disrupt the order in a current male-dominant society.

The Obatalian credo of not paying full price or providing full labor

ridicules the indeterminacy of what constitutes necessary payment or necessary labor. If you can get something on sale, then why should anyone pay full price? If you can make just one gigantic rice ball in half an hour instead of having to work all day long to make hundreds of little ones, why not do that? Mrs. Obata highlights the arbitrariness of the well-regulated patriarchal society, which turns out to be not so well regulated after all.

It is true that Mrs. Obata is chased out of hell, here represented as a male-dominant society. But there are always members in the society who are influenced by her. Her family, or the smallest social unit, not only accept her but respect her as, in her husband's words, "a model of a housewife." In other words, Mrs. Obata, a potential to overturn the social establishments is significantly accepted by, and included in, society. Young women are especially vulnerable to Mrs. Obata's infectious power, and their symptoms are diagnosed by the author of *Obatalian* as "pre-Obatalian syndrome." Having seen Mr. Obata diligently serving his wife, a young neighboring woman entreats Mrs. Obata to initiate her into the Obatalian way of thinking and acting: "Please let me become your disciple." In this manner, one Obatalian turns a young woman into her replica.

There is no tragic sense of a decline of womanhood in the configuration of the Obatalian. On the contrary, Mrs. Obata and her fellow Obatalians enjoy the prime of womanhood without repressing any desire that they may have. Obatalians disrupt the long cherished myth that women should be devastated by aging, a myth that has been condemning middle-aged women to low self-esteem and increased subservience to men. One of the recent Japanese films, *The Prime of Womanhood* (1994) directed by Nobuhiro Ohbayashi, clearly defines the "prime of womanhood" as the age of forty or over.

* * * * *

Loss of bodily attraction is not made an issue in *Obatalian*, and the deliberate repression of sexuality characterizes the Japanese representation of middle-aged women. Instead of sexuality, seniority is introduced and provides a rule by which to depict women of different ages.

The comparative study of representations of age difference between Japanese and American cinema, that I have been pursuing in this essay, should also discuss "old age." Thus far, I have been exclusively concerned with representations of middle-aged and young women, but my analysis can be extended to include elderly women in Japanese and American film. Elderly women in Japanese film, as in the case of middle-aged women, win respect for their quick-wittedness, audacity, and intelligence, while exercising a manipulative power over other characters. The eighty-two-year old female protagonist in Kihachi Okamoto's *Big Kidnaping* (1990) is a rich owner of a mansion, which is maintained by several servants. She is kidnapped by three young men, but gradually acquires their respect and takes over their project. Seeing an opportunity, she uses the kidnapping to get ten billion yen (or a hundred million U.S. dollars) in cash as a ransom for herself. She has her own properties sold and gets all the money without paying any taxes for capital gains. An *Obatalian* credo of getting profit from special discounts is exercised here on grand scale. The elderly woman is respected by all the members in her household and even by the kidnappers, one of whom decides to work for her as a carpenter after everything has been carried out just as she had planned. He wants to "learn from [her]" the art of living. The relationship between the elderly woman and the young man is that of master/disciple, strong/weak, giver/given. No sexual feelings emerge between the woman over eighty and the man in his twenties.

If a similar couple were transplanted in American culture, however, sexuality could become a focus. The female protagonist of almost eighty and the young male protagonist of twenty in Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1970), for example, fall in love with each other as a matter of course. Despite her outward appearance, the elderly woman is represented as radiantly young inside, satisfying the American youth-fetish.



Fig 53



Fig 54

The emphasis on sexual attraction is palpable. The unsexed representation of elderly women in Japanese film makes an interesting contrast to the undecending desire of aged American women to remain youthfully feminine. The American representation of elderly women as feminine and sexually attractive is not only a direct expression of youth-fetish but seems to be a reaction against the American myth that women are miserably affected by aging. "Age obsession," which Bill in *All About Eve* points out as an unbearable aspect of his lover Margo, is shared by female characters in American film, as I have argued.

Lindsay Anderson's *The Whales of August* (1987) clearly visualizes the American preoccupation with sexual attraction. The amorous feelings must be introduced between man and woman, even if they are over eighty years old. The eighty-two-year old female protagonist invites a neighboring man, also in his eighties, to her house for dinner. The camera follows the woman in close-up and reveals her endeavors to make herself look beautiful for him; she combs her hair, puts make-up on, and carefully checks her appearance in a mirror (Figures 53-55). The succeeding long shots frame her slowly descending the stair and standing, in full beauty, before the eyes of the man, who intensely looks at her (Figures 56-58). This way of representing an old woman as a sexual object pleasing male eyes would not occur in Japanese film, in which any sign of the sexuality of old women would be removed.

Age difference is the clue to understanding the differing attitudes to-



Fig 55



Fig 56



Fig 57



Fig 58

wards women in Japanese and American film. Films of the two nationalities share the idea of categorizing women by age, but do not agree on the ways in which young, middle-aged, and old women should be represented. In the future, I will resume my comparative analysis of “elderly” women in Japanese and American film, to examine in greater detail what I could only begin to sketch out in this essay.

NOTES

- 1 *Screen 16* (Autumn 1975), 6-18
- 2 Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, eds., *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

- 1994).
- 3 Patricia Erens, ed., *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
 - 4 See Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movie* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, 1973), p. 244, in which she points out such a myth that “women are more devastated by aging than men.”
 - 5 Chie Nakane, *Dynamics of a Vertical Culture* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1978), pp. 84-85.
 - 6 Ibid., p.85.
 - 7 Ibid., p.180.
 - 8 Ibid., p.183.
 - 9 See the section of “Onibaba” in *Film Index International* (London: British Film Institute, 1993).
 - 10 In an interview with Kaneto Shindo quoted in Joan Mellen, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema* (New York: Liveright, 1975), p.81.
 - 11 Ibid.