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Stillness in Motion: The Sleeping Man of Oguri Kohei

Abstract

"Stillness in Motion: The *Sleeping Man* of Oguri Kohei" investigates the Buddhist elements of this award-winning Japanese film. The sense of tragedy in the film is seen, not in the scenes of the young protagonist locked in a coma, but rather in the plight of the South East Asian women who work in the mountainous region of Gumma prefecture where the story takes place. The symbolism of the noh play MATSUKAZE (performed near the end of the film) is tied into the paradoxes of the main characters. The cyclical, and elliptical, nature of this narrative makes this film a unique viewing experience for students of religion and film studies alike.

While any attempt at depicting Buddhist thought visually is like a finger pointing at the moon, in rare instances there are films that partake of qualities of Buddhism: a sense of detachment and calm, a closeness to Nature, a cyclical sense of time, and a meditative stance toward the paradoxes of life.¹ One such film is *Sleeping Man* (*Nemuru otoko*, 1996) by Japanese director Oguri Kohei.² Neither fully a visual "tone poem" nor a narrative-based film, *Sleeping Man* could be considered an example of David Bordwell's conception of a parametric style of narration, which is described as "style-centered," or even "poetic."³ Oguri has made conscious attempts to find a new pace and structure for his film, largely ignoring standard Hollywood conventions of narrative and editing. Like other films that attempt to illustrate spiritual qualities, *Sleeping Man* is strongest when it rests content within its ambiguous, elliptical structure; weakest when it tries to teach rather than merely show.

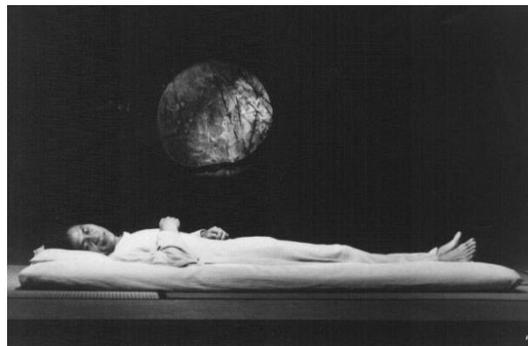
"Stillness" might seem a paradoxical quality in an art form like the cinema defined by movement, yet *Sleeping Man*, with its laconic pace and loose narrative structure, invites the viewer to look beyond actions and events to a deeper, philosophical state which could be called a sense of "stillness in motion." Just as one must look beyond the minimal surface events depicted in a no drama to discover its "flower" (*hana*), to use a phrase central to Zeami's thought, or as one must view the "empty" spaces as well as the brushed-in mountains, rivers, and

waterfalls in a classical Asian landscape painting, the viewer can find that the quality of "stillness" in a film like *Sleeping Man* becomes a series of moments of concentrated energy, and openness to transition.

Images of stillness

The paradox in Oguri's *Sleeping Man* is that a man in a coma can be not only a central character but also a vibrant one. A man in a deep coma needs very little--some nourishment, warmth. What Oguri implies is that Takuji, the "sleeping man," also needs companionship or, perhaps even more, that companions like his boyhood friend Kamimura (played by rising star Koji Yakusho), are the ones who need him. And they need him for exactly this sense of stillness in motion, this soundless echo, this endless mirror.

The nihonga painting of the moon on the screen in the room where Takuji lies seems to cast a translucent light on all who enter.⁴ This traditional Japanese-style room is a space



divorced from time in which visitors can enter a kind of eternity. The director shows Takuji moving ever so slightly in response to his visitors, whether they be a stray fly that has impudently entered his nose, or an old friend who lies down on the

tatami mat in harmony with Takuji's form and tells him of the world Takuji seems to have left behind. A mirror for all who visit him, this sleeping man, like the moon, reflects nothing. Takuji is the sculptural moment, and all who come into contact with him are like the rain and the wind.

Film scholar Aaron Gerow calls *Sleeping Man* "an antidramatic symphony of images" that leaves behind the black-and-white realism of Oguri's first film *Muddy River* (*Doro no kawa*, 1981). Gerow notes how the theme of sleep links Oguri's last two films. In *The Sting of Death* (*Shi no toge*, 1991), as the film closes, the emotionally disturbed wife prepares to undergo sleep therapy in an attempt to cure her illness.⁵

The elegance of the scenario of *Sleeping Man*, co-scripted by Kenmochi Kiyoshi and Oguri, makes this film more than the series of beautiful images often mentioned in reviews. The counterpoint of dialogue (or monologue) and visual image is subtle, and dialogue cuts do not always fall where expected. In fact, the editing seems to follow a different rhythm than that of the actual events and speech. As Hanasaki Kohei notes in his *Asahi Shimbun* review:

"In very little of the dialogue do two characters sit and face each other. Speakers are lined up beside each other, or separated into different spaces and caused to speak as if their words were



floating up towards a surface of silence. The volume of sound as they speak does not reflect differences in their location respective to the camera. The tempo floats slowly at a short remove from the dimensions of the everyday. All of these factors combine to form a scene set in a certain dimension of symbolism."⁶

Oguri explains: "In real life, communication is not always over when conversation ceases, and when you go out into wide open spaces like forests and rivers, the grip that conversation has on things begins to weaken." When I asked the director if the image of the man lying in a deep sleep was inspired by his viewing of statues of recumbent Buddhas during his recent trips throughout Southeast Asia, he replied ambiguously: "It could be the Buddha. It could be Christ..."⁷ This unwillingness to identify any one tradition mirrors the general framework of the film in which the role of Tia is played by Indonesian actress Christine Hakim, and the role of Takuji, the sleeping man, by Korean actor Ahn Sung-ki.⁸ This might not seem revolutionary compared to the frequent appearance of European actors in

films from a variety of other countries in Europe, but it is far more rare in Asian, and particularly Japanese, cinema

Unlike the rushed filming schedule of most contemporary Japanese films, all those involved in *Sleeping Man* devoted six months to life in an abandoned school-turned-film studio and lodging in Gunma prefecture (Oguri's home region and one of the major sponsors of the film). This more leisurely pace allowed the actors to feel at home with the rhythm of rural life and with the changing seasons.

The film has a cyclical structure, beginning and ending with the same shot (the first at night and the second at day). Images of the moon predominate, both in the mise-



en-scene and in the scenario: Takuji fell on a night of the full moon. The poem by noted Japanese poet Hagiwara Sakutaro that the school children recite one night introduces the image of a cat howling at the moon. One character in the film recites the folk saying: "When the crescent moon turns its back, there's a death. When it opens its arms, there's a birth." While circular themes in the narrative are subtle, circular images in the sets--waterwheels, the translucent moon painted on the screen in Takuji's room, the actual moon viewed by all the main characters, the arch of the rainbow--are far larger than expected.

The tragedy of the outsider

Paradoxically, the sense of tragedy in the film is not concentrated in Takuji's precarious condition. We realize he has moved from a "sleeping" state to death with scarcely any



indication, or break, in the surface structure of the film. The eventual death of this young man is sad, but not tragic. In a quiet, dignified manner, we are introduced to the sadness that each character shoulders: the loneliness of the old man living in the mill, the hypothetical questioning of the mother to a son who may not be able to hear anymore, the struggles for survival of Omoni, an ethnic Korean who runs a small eatery-cum-bicycle parking lot, who adopts a parentless village boy, Ryu. Even the seemingly stoic Tia finally reveals that she has lost a child due to floods caused by deforestation in her home country. Wataru, the slow-witted boy who found Takuji in the mountains, and who now helps watch over him, illustrates a central theme of the film: how sadness can be assimilated into new life, and weakness can become strength.

There is more of a sense of tragedy in the lives of the *minami no onna* (literally "women from the south"), seemingly from somewhere in Southeast Asia, who carry out jobs in Japan which might offer higher pay but less respect than what

they could find in their own country(or countries). At the end of the film, one elderly Japanese man in the public bath mentions to another that these minami no onna have not been seen around the village in a while. Where have they gone? We doubt that it will be any other place in Japan that will bring them much more happiness.

In Japan marginality has traditionally implied a kind of psychic ambivalence, a mixture of fear and desire on the part of the majority culture. Marginal characters in Japan are marked by the stigma of "pollution" yet they are also regarded as possessing sacred power. Writing about the role of the stranger in Japanese folk religion, anthropologist Yoshida Teigo notes that, in Japanese society, "it seems that strangers and visitors...not only represent the mystical 'other world,' but they are also the marginal 'liminal' figure or things which mediate between the world of uchi (inside) and the world of yoso (outside)."⁹

Uchi comprises the world of the inner circle: one's family, work environment, classmates, and soto or yoso is made up of the world of the outer circle: strangers, mere acquaintances, the lands outside the borders of the 'island country' [shimaguni] of Japan. In recent years, the banner of "internationalization" is often raised to stress how Japan is striving to become a more active member of the community of nations. In their examination of the concepts and practice of uchi and soto within Japanese society, Jane M. Bachnik and Charles J. Quinn Jr. propose

that "the universally defined orientations for inside/outside are linked with culturally defined perspectives for self, society and language in Japan."¹⁰ The Japanese tendency toward situational positioning within a particular frame means that the movement between uchi and soto is often a fluid and contextually dependent one. Japanese terms that employ the words uchi or soto (like *uchimuki* [facing inward] or *sotomawari* [making rounds of corporate customers]) tend to describe a position relative to a frame.

Although there can be said to be a range of outsiders in Japanese society, the farther one departs from what is (often erroneously) considered the norm, the more one is likely to arouse suspicion and ostracism. Sociologist James Valentine outlines four different marginal groups in Japanese society: (1) those with foreign blood (such as Okinawans, Koreans, Chinese, *ainoko* [children of mixed marriages]), (2) those who have had (either short or long term) foreign contact, (3) those who have become polluted through illness (such as the mentally ill, handicapped, *hibakusha* [atomic bomb victims], victims of Alzheimer's disease and of environmental pollution), and (4) deviants of either a criminal or ideological nature (the *yakuza*, the political left).¹¹

As Kamishima Juro notes in his article entitled "Society of Convergence: An Alternative for the Homogeneity Theory": "A consistent and notable feature of Japanese self-awareness since the defeat in World War II has been the view that

Japan is unique, and that its people are racially, socially and culturally homogenous."¹² On a more optimistic note, Nakane Chie reminds that it was only in the latter half of the Tokugawa period that these characteristics became firmly engrained, and that patterns learned can be "unlearned" with effort.¹³

In examining the complex relationship between uchi and soto, Japanese filmmakers like Oguri help define the "frame" within a given context, and point to what might lie outside of it. In general, Japanese films that focus on the issue of marginality expose the myth of Japan's homogeneity while they highlight the way Japan camouflages the problem of the treatment of Asians (and other foreigners) living within its borders. In this sense, directors of films on this topic are asking fundamental questions about what it means to be Japanese.

Matsukaze

Near the end of *Sleeping Man*, the village watches an outdoor performance of the no play *Matsukaze* ("Pine Wind").¹⁴ In the no drama, nothing really seems to be



happening. An actor, often heavily costumed and masked, moves forward a few steps and an entire journey is taken. With a simple raising of a hand to the eyes, a

character is weeping. Nothing happens and yet parents search for lost children, unrequited loves are mourned, or an elderly couple celebrate their lasting union like two deeply rooted pine trees.

Matsukaze tells the stories of two young women who make their living collecting and selling salt gathered from the sea. Matsukaze (literally "pine wind") and Murasame (literally "village rain") return to Earth as ghosts to recount their sad tale of unrequited love for Yukihiro who had loved the girls during his three years of exile on Suma, but who died soon after returning to the Capital. The tone of the play, in which the dead speak to the living, is carried over to the film.

Zeami considered *Matsukaze* a play that reaches one of the upper three levels of artistic and spiritual achievement, the level of the "Flower of Profundity."¹⁵ Just as moon imagery permeates the film *Sleeping Man*, the no play contains several famous lines about the reflection of the moon.¹⁶ *Matsukaze* ends on a somewhat pessimistic note that "only the wind in the pine remains." The image of the shabby hut in which the girls live is transformed in *Sleeping Man* into a hut which is an extension of the freedom several of the characters feel in the forests. Both play and film are immersed in memory, in a nostalgia for a world gone by. The lush visual imagery of the village, captured by Maruike Osame, director of photography, presents the fictitious village of Hitosuji-- a rural world rapidly disappearing in contemporary Japan.

Some scholars feel that the stomping of no actors on the wooden stage might be tied to earlier shamanistic practices to summon up a kami (Shinto god).¹⁷ In *Sleeping Man*, Takuji's mother, assured that she has seen her son's soul escaping in a "dust-devil" blowing outside the window, instructs all those present to make loud noises to call back the soul. (The result is a semi-comic scene of adults running around the house beating on pans, pillars, or anything else.) In the film, the mountain itself is said to have a sound "like goblins drumming."

Paradox

Sleeping Man aims both at a specificity (rural Japanese life as it used to be) and a lack of specificity. In the elliptical scenario, we learn very little about the main characters. We know that Takuji has returned from South America, and has had an accident while walking in his beloved mountains. When Christine Hakim asked the director about the background of the "woman from a southern island," he replied that it was not important and, if she preferred, she could consider herself a woman from the moon. She finally decided to consider herself as a part of nature, in tune with falling trees and other dramatic natural shifts. Although she lives in the mountains at present, she is the character most closely connected with water and the sea, in both their life-giving, and destructive, aspects.

There are scenes of apparent coincidences that appear to be more than coincidences: Tia and Kamimura meet by chance in an abandoned hut in the mountain where Tia has spent the night after



wandering alone through the forest. (Kamimura had earlier mentioned this hut-- connected to a childhood memory-- in one of his visits to Takuji.) The hut used to be occupied by a man who brought a blind goze singer to live with him there.¹⁸ There appears to be some sympathy between Tia and the Japanese man, but this potential love theme, like so many other themes, is only implied. And who is the man seen walking in the mountain near the end of the film? Is it Takuji? Takuji's ghost? Why is it that the man presented as the most knowledgeable person in the village about the mountains is the one who suffered a serious fall there?

One character in the film refers to trees that live through the winter without leaves but are not dead (an analogy to the figure of the "sleeping man"). This ties into scenes of apparent miracles, like the sound of water in a well that was believed to be dry. All of these surprising events are presented in a natural, non-sensationalist, manner. As the *Asahi Shimbun* critic writes: "The film...portrays a way of a life in which value is placed simply on existence...`being' exists in a cycle

that proceeds from birth to death and back to birth again...worthy of being remembered."¹⁹

¹ Buddhist imagery in Asian cinema can be found in the representation of the Buddha as sculpture, as scroll painting, as black-ink painting, or less frequently as a historical figure, as in Martin Scorsese's recent film *Kundun*. Buddhist imagery has been presented reverentially in films like Mizoguchi's Miyamoto *Musashi* (1944), where a warrior perfects his meditative discipline by carving statues of the Buddha, or sardonically, in films like Ichikawa's *Odd Obsession* (also known as *The Ke, Kagi*, 1959) where an elegant Chinese-style statue of the Buddha witnesses scenes of debauchery and murder.

² Japanese names will be given in Japanese order, with surname first.

³ Note David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 284-89. Bordwell summarizes this style in the following way: "Parametric narration establishes a distinctive intrinsic norm, often involving an unusually limited range of stylistic options. It develops this norm in additive fashion. Style thus enters into shifting relations, dominant or subordinate, with the syuzhet [plot]. The spectator is cued to construct a prominent stylistic norm, recognizing style as motivated neither realistically nor compositionally nor transtextually. The viewer must also form assumptions and hypotheses about the stylistic development of the film" (pp. 288-89).

⁴ *Nihonga* is a modified traditional style of Japanese art which developed in the Meiji period. *Nihonga* maintains the strong sense of line of traditional Japanese art, but also includes a brighter range of colors and the use of Western chiaroscuro. The *nihonga* painting of the moon in Takuji's room is by noted Japanese artist Hiramatsu Reiji.

⁵ "Oguri's Deep Sleeper," *The Daily Yomiuri* (15 February 1996), p. 9.

⁶ Hanasaki Kohei, "People, Nature: The Value of 'Being,' The Breadth and the Beauty of Director Oguri's *Sleeping Man*," *Asahi Shimbun* (Tuesday, 5 March 1996).

⁷ "The First Step to a New Expression: His New Film *Sleeping Man*," *Sankei Shimbun* (Wednesday, 14 February 1996).

⁸ In Korea, the film had its premiere at the Pusan International Film Festival.

⁹ Yoshida Teigo, "The Stranger as God: The Place of the Outsider in Japanese Folk Religion," *Ethnology* 20: 2 (April 1981), p. 96.

¹⁰ Jane M. Bachnik and Charles J. Quinn, Jr., ed., *Situated Meaning: Inside and Outside in Japanese Self, Society and Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 7 (emphases in original).

¹¹ James Valentine, "On the Borderline: The Significance of Marginality in Japanese Society." In Eyal Ben-Ari, ed., *Unwrapping Japan: Society and Culture in Anthropological Perspective* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 40.

¹² Kamishima Juro, "Society of Convergence: An Alternative for the Homogeneity Theory," *The Japan Foundation Newsletter* 17:3 (January 1990)1, p. 2.

¹³ Nakane Chie, "Japan in the Context of Asia," *The Japan Foundation Newsletter* 17:3 (January 1990), p. 2.

¹⁴ This *no* sequence is performed by the well-known actors Kanze Tessenkai and Akio.

¹⁵ Note *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*, trans. by J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984).

¹⁶ For example, the chorus proclaims: "The fisherfolk, like us, delight less in the moon than in the dipping of its reflection," and Matsukaze, looking into her pail of sea water, notes: "The moon above is one; Below it has two, no, three reflections." From Donald Keene, ed., *Twenty Plays of the No Theatre* (NY: Columbia UP, 1970), pp. 24-5. These images of the moon draw from classical poetry, such as the poem by Fujiwara Takamitsu (*Shuishu* no. 435) "In this world which seems difficult to pass through, how I envy the pure moon!" and "The fishermen of Suma are accustomed to the moon, spending the autumn in clothes wet with waves blown by the salt wind." (*Fujiwara Tameuji, Shingo-senshu*, no. 361.)

¹⁷ Note: Benito Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

¹⁸ The *goze* singers were blind singers who traveled around Japan performing music on the shamisen (3-stringed lute).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Hanasaki Kohei (cited in film brochure for *Sleeping Man*).