

Techno-Somatics of Cinema: The Machinic and the Psychic in Tanizaki’s “Jinmenso”

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Summary

Tanizaki Junichiro’s “The Tumor with a Human Face” (1918) features a haunted film that drives its viewers mad. As a literary work about the production and viewing effects of film, this short story explores some of the fundamental differences between literature and film as narrative and affective arts. In this paper, I discuss what these differences might imply for the art of adaptation. Furthermore, I explore the interface between the cinema and our visual sensory system, and argue that film constitutes a technologically embedded mode of perception. Finally I draw on psychoanalysis to study how the cinema is related to psychosis, and argue that it parallels and enacts a primordial repression.

Keywords

Tanizaki Junichiro, Virginia Woolf, Tom Gunning, early film history, technology and sensory history, macroperception and microperception, cinema and psychoanalysis.

I’m somewhat embarrassed to admit this, but I think the scariest film I’ve ever watched is the 1998 Japanese film *Ring* directed by Nakata Hideo. Embarrassed because, frankly, it’s not exactly what one would describe as a deeply thoughtful film or an Oscar contender. And yet it remains a memorable movie more than fifteen years after its release: just about half of the students in my first-year seminar last year, for example, told me it

was their choice for scariest film of all time. Like my students (who were too young to have watched it when it appeared in theatres), I happened to watch *Ring* at home on rented video. The moment in the film that did it for me was not exactly the famous scene of the long-haired Sadako crawling out of the TV set into Takayama Ryuji's living room, but in fact just before that, when the TV screen suddenly buzzes static and then briefly goes blank. At the time, I was a jobless post-graduate student in London living with some friends of similarly modest means, and our communal TV was a used Sony Trinitron box with a coat-hanger antenna and a bloated screen that would in fact quite often go fuzzy without warning, especially, I observed, when the air was damp. So when the screen went static in the film, I think for the briefest of moments it crossed my mind that it might be our TV acting up again, and I found myself with an uncanny feeling that I was in two spaces at the same time, or more precisely, that I was somehow stuck in limbo between two spaces: still immersed in the film, my mind was there in Takayama's living room viewing the monochrome images on his TV screen of the creepy well where Sadako was trapped; and simultaneously the fuzzy screen partially brought me back to myself and to our North London flat where I was watching a rented movie on our Trinitron on a rainy weeknight. It was that momentary confusion that got me, I think, and which the next scene of Sadako crawling through the TV screen into the living room (Still in black and white no less!) exploited to such hair-raising excess. (Later, when we had finished watching the film and one of my flatmates turned off the VCR without first turning down the volume on the TV, thereby making it suddenly blast static again, well, that really scared the bejabbers out of me... but that's another story.)

Nakata's film was adapted from an eponymous novel written in 1991 by Suzuki Koji, which in turn, according to an interview with Suzuki, was at least partially inspired by a short story written in 1918 by Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, "The Tumor with a Human Face" ("Jinmenso"). In terms of plot Tanizaki's story is in fact completely different from *Ring*, consisting largely of a plot summary of a film within the story, and nothing at all about a crazy-psychic witch-girl trapped in a well. What *Ring* does borrow from Tanizaki's story is the plot device of a haunted film whose curse affects those who watch it—that is, the idea that something within a film could breach the movie or TV screen that separates a film's internal diegetic reality from the spectator's external reality, and have a direct effect on the spectator. In the case of *Ring*, it is the evil spirit of Sadako mysteriously kept alive on a videotape, and in the case of "The Tumor" the curse of a character within a film that drives those who watch it mad. Writing in 1926, Virginia Woolf famously observed that when we watch a film, "[w]e see life as it is when we have no part in it" (349); but in Tanizaki's story and Nakata's film, the point is that we cannot be so certain of our supposedly safe distance from the life depicted in films. Moreover, both *Ring* and "The Tumor" have at their center a modern visual technology—film and video—haunted by an exotic, evil spirit that feels anything but modern, and it is that uneasy mixture of modern science and pre-modern evil, the technological and the supernatural, that *Ring* takes up in homage to Tanizaki's story.

The loose links between Tanizaki's short story and Nakata's film are of interest not so much from the standpoint of analyzing how literature-to-film adaptations work per se, but rather with respect to what they each suggest about certain aspects of the experience of viewing films, aspects which

are often taken for granted and remain underanalyzed. Thomas LaMarre writes that at the heart of “The Tumor” there is “tension between affect and narrative” (105), that is to say, an indeterminacy between sensory shock and narrative suspense. In this article, I want to explore this tension between affect and narrative not just in Tanizaki’s story, but more generally as a fundamental aspect of the ontology of film. My discussions will primarily center on Tanizaki’s short story, but with an eye towards what Nakata’s film picks up in terms of technological affect from Tanizaki. I am interested in what the short story “The Tumor with a Human Face” and the film *Ring* suggest about film not so much as a narrative medium similar to literature but more importantly as a technologically embedded, sensory experience that radically differs from literature.

As a starting point for considering these issues, I shall borrow the distinction between microperception and macroperception that the philosopher of technology Don Ihde develops with regard to how we perceive and engage with the surrounding world. Here are Ihde’s definitions of these two key terms:

What is usually taken as sensory perception (what is immediate and focused bodily in actual seeing, hearing, etc.), I shall call microperception. But there is also what might be called a cultural, or hermeneutic, perception, which I shall call macroperception. Both belong equally to the life world. And both dimensions of perception are closely linked and intertwined. (29)

Ihde uses these terms to theorize how, as Vivian Sobchack explains,

“perceptual and representational technologies such as photography, motion pictures, television, video and computers in-form us twice over: first through the specific material conditions by which they latently engage and extend our senses at the transparent and lived bodily level [...] and then again through their manifest representational function by which they engage our senses consciously and textually at the hermeneutic level” (Sobchack 138). While the vast majority of film criticism emphasizes the latter macroperceptual level of hermeneutic-cultural contexts within which a film is materially and socially embedded, my emphasis is on the former microperceptual level of our sensory and physical engagement with film. That is to say, more than as a medium of story-telling as such, I am interested in how films engage us at a more — How shall we say it? — “unconscious,” sensory-bodily level: how it creates the illusion of movement and life; how it manages to immerse, or better, *suture* us seamlessly in a cinematic reality through techniques and devices such as montage, close-up, camera angle, and so on; and ultimately how it manages to have a direct “bodily” effect on us. As I will discuss, it is something akin to the distinction between the microperceptual and the macroperceptual — the sensory and the hermeneutic — that informs the “tension between affect and narrative” at the center of Tanizaki’s interest in film as an emerging aesthetic form in the early-twentieth century.

Some readers may be skeptical about my admittedly casual use of potentially problematic terms like the “unconscious” versus “conscious” aspects of viewing films, or the “sensory-bodily” versus the “cultural-hermeneutic” levels of perception, as if these paired terms can be trusted to form such neat oppositions. Where do we draw the line, one might ask, between “sensory” and “culturally filtered” levels of perception? On

what grounds are the senses more “immediate” than contemplation and interpretation? In fact, these questions help us to clarify an important aspect of how Ihde understands the relationship between the microperceptual and macroperceptual. Even as Ihde distinguishes between these two levels of perception, his point is not to suggest that the sensory–bodily and the cultural–hermeneutic can actually be neatly separated from each other or that the former is somehow “prior” (pre–cultural, universal) to the latter. Rather his distinction is developed on the premise that the two levels of perception are *always already* inextricably intertwined and even indistinguishable. By microperceptual, Ihde is not positing a pure level of sensory experience that is unfiltered by culture, or some level of perceiving that is free of material, historical contingencies. In fact, his premise is precisely the opposite—that microperception is by nature *techno–logical*, and hence also (like macroperception) always already grounded in historically contingent material conditions.

Ihde’s understanding of technology, in this regard, follows from that of Martin Heidegger, in that for Ihde technologies do not just *mediate* our presence to the world but in fact *constitute* it: that is to say, technology does not come between us and the world in the manner of a filter; rather technology is always constitutive of our way of being–in–the–world. Thus to analyze the microperceptual is not to posit some pre–technological or pre–cultural mode of perception that is liberated from history, but indeed to consider how we learn to *perceive technologically* through history, and—borrowing Sobchack’s shorthand—to study the particular “techno–logic” of a historical moment. Emphasizing the microperceptual over the macroperceptual, therefore, does not deny historical material contingencies,

but in fact affirms their existence at the most fundamental levels of our presence to the world. If, to borrow Marshall McLuhan's dictum, "the medium is the message," that is because the medium is never a neutral form or container for a political content, but instead is a material and historically contingent element that determines content. And as we shall see, film for Tanizaki was not simply a new visual medium but more precisely a new perceptual mode of being-in-the-world: that is to say, Tanizaki puts forth an ontology of film. To consider how Tanizaki understood the techno-logic of film as a sensory mode of being, first we need to position Tanizaki's short story in relation to the history of film.

Narrative Cinema or a Cinema of Attractions?

As Thomas LaMarre has detailed, Tanizaki's intense interest in film as a newly emerging art form is apparent from many of his works and essays written as early as 1912 and through the rest of the 1910s and 1920s. Worldwide, this coincides with the period when a new critical discourse on film was developing especially in Europe and the United States surrounding the theories of people like Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Jean Epstein. And as Aaron Gerow, Joanne Bernardi and others have debated at great length, critical interest in film was also significant in Japan during these early years, with a popular film discourse emerging from journalistic reviews of movies eventually coalescing—however loosely—into the so-called Pure Film Movement (*jun eiga undou*) from about 1915. Although the Pure Film Movement, for which Tanizaki declared his support at a very early stage, was by no means a unified project based on anything like a core manifesto or set of principles, what one can observe is a shared

interest in exploring the possibilities for a uniquely cinematic art distinct from other arts like literature and drama.

In this historical context, Tanizaki's early interest in the film industry and in film as a newly emerging art is remarkable. This was a period in which critical discourse was increasingly turning its attention towards ways in which film as a narrative form could distinguish itself from literature and the traditional stage, and in this respect the fact that a respected novelist like Tanizaki was increasingly immersing himself in the still nascent medium comes as a surprise. Modernist literary movements that drew heavily on cinematic elements, such as the New Sensation School (*shinkanku-ha*) led by writers like Yokomitsu Riichi and Kawabata Yasunari, would not take off until the mid-1920s, and the major film-related writings of literary figures like Kobayashi Hideo and Osaki Midori would not yet appear until the early-1930s. In contrast, Tanizaki was already penning film essays in the mid-1910s and publicly announced a desire to write photoplays in 1917. In 1920, Tanizaki was offered a position as a literary consultant by the newly formed Taikatsu Studios (Taisho katsuei kaisha), and announced that he would put his literary career on hold to work in the film industry full time. Hence "The Tumor" written in 1918 appeared at a time when Tanizaki was deeply immersed in his explorations of film art, and when Tanizaki himself could be said to have been in a transitional phase of experimentation working at a crossroads between literature and film.

In line with the so-called Pure Film Movement, Tanizaki was interested in exploring and developing film as a new and distinct aesthetic form, and this tendency is apparent in the intense attention paid to various film techniques such as montage, double exposure and close-up in "The Tumor". As

LaMarre explains “The attention lavished on film effects like camera angle, magnification (or close-up), and superimposition creates the impression that narrative is of little or lesser importance” (105). Later, we will discuss in depths how Tanizaki presents and uses such film techniques and his explorations of the ways in which such techniques affect film viewers at the microperceptual level; but first, it is useful to consider the development of such film techniques in the early history of film in general, and see how such techniques were connected to the development of film as both a narrative and affective form. The issue of the role of new cinematic techniques in early film history, however, is by no means free of controversy, and needs to be approached with care. Two versions of early film history are of particular importance.

The first is the classical view of early film history which focuses on film’s divergence from traditional stage theatre and the development of narrative film, running from when the medium first appeared in the late-19th century through to the mid-1910s when the cinematic narrative form is understood to have settled on a core set of formal elements and crystalized. Classical film historians and theorists such as Jean Mitry, Georges Sadoul, and Lewis Jacobs tend to see the first two decades or so of film history as a kind of developmental phase, when producers of film were still searching for and developing the uniquely cinematic techniques which would eventually allow film to achieve the goal of effectively telling a story. For classical film historians, narrative film has its origins in the traditional theatre where, in the most primitive cases, a camera was used to record a stage production and the resulting film consisted of simply reproducing it. Crucial for historians like Mitry, Jacobs, Sadoul and others is the evolutionary development of

cinematic techniques like close-up, shooting angle, camera mobility, and cutting and editing, which allowed cinema to differentiate itself from theatre and develop an inherently cinematic logic and grammar for narrative. Mitry, for example, frames early film history before WWI as a struggle between theatricality and narrativity, and sees the development of film techniques as one of the keys for film to liberate itself from theatre and develop as a narrative form in its own right. Because film was mute, it had to compensate for this lack by developing unique visual narrative techniques, which became the essence of film as a mature narrative form in the 1910s. One is tempted to draw parallels between classical film history and understandings of the Pure Film Movement, which is also based on the premise that the 1910s and 1920s were a phase in which film practitioners and critics were searching for uniquely cinematic techniques that would distinguish film from literature and the stage.

A second version of early film history put forth by Tom Gunning and others in the 1980s is one that displaces narrativity from its privileged position in that history, and puts forth the alternative notion of a “cinema of attractions.” According to Gunning, the problem with classical film history is that it is fundamentally teleological, basing itself on the premise that the development of narrative was the central concern for producers of films from the earliest moments of its history even before its uniquely narrative-oriented techniques had been developed. The evolutionary logic at the heart of classical film theory assumes that the earliest producers of film already recognized narrativity as the essence of film almost from the time of the technology’s birth, and that they steadily developed the film techniques that eventually allowed narrativity to be brought to the forefront in a uniquely

cinematic manner. In contrast to classical film historians, Gunning argues that, prior to the Nickelodeon boom that reaches its peak at about 1908, narrative was not an obvious end-goal of films, and that there was not yet a clear recognition that the essential “point” of film was to tell a story. Instead, Gunning traces early film back to its origins in the nineteenth-century fairground where it developed as a curiosity-arousing attraction that, like the stereoscope, the peepshow and a host of other visual attractions, foregrounded the act of display. That is to say, the appeal of film was seen to lie in the visual effects of film, its ability to expand and transform visual experience. In Ihde’s terms, we could say that it was at the microperceptual level of sensory experience that film was marketed to audiences instead of at the macroperceptual level of narrative.

Viewed in this light, we see that film in its early days was not understood as a device that would neutrally record acts or events, and the classical argument that early film essentially started as a tool for recording and simply reproducing theatrical stage productions breaks down. “Rather,” Gunning argues,

even the seemingly stylistically neutral film consisting of a single-shot without camera tricks involved a cinematic gesture of presenting for view, of displaying. The objects of this display varied among current events (parades, funerals, sporting events); scenes of everyday life (street scenes, children playing, laborers at work); arranged scenes (slapstick gags, a highlight from a well-known play, a romantic tableau); vaudeville performances (juggling, acrobatics, dance); or even camera tricks (Méliès-like magic transformations). But all such

events were absorbed by a cinematic gesture of presentation, and it was this technological means of representation that constituted the initial fascination of cinema. (42–43)

To illustrate the prominent role of attraction over narrative in early film history, Gunning provides the examples of pioneers like Georges Méliès and Charles Pathé, in whose works, “attractions could be crossbred with narrative forms, but with attractions still dominating, so that narrative situations simply provided a more naturalized way to move from one attraction to the next” (48). For example, Méliès would sometimes use a well-known fairy tale to provide logical connections between a series of cinematic tricks involving dissolves, multiple-exposure shots, or time-lapse photography: in effect, the storyline served as a “pretext” for presenting attractions.

Gunning’s point is not that narrative had no place before the Nickelodeon era, but rather that “attractions most frequently provide the dominant for film during this period and often jockey for prominence until 1908 or so (and even occasionally later)” (43). And further, Gunning argues that after 1908, even as narrative becomes a dominant in the classical film of the 1910s onwards, it develops a “potentially dynamic relation to nonnarrative material” (43), so that display and attraction were by no means abolished by the classical paradigm. Gunning’s notion of a cinema of attractions, therefore, has important implications for our understanding of film history after 1908 as well, when we consider that while narrative did indeed become a dominant in the classical era, this did not mean that display and attraction were necessarily subsumed in the service of narrative. In the language

of psychoanalysis, we might venture that on the one hand the cinema of attractions engages the spectator at the level of the imaginary—that is, at the level of sheer shock, joy, fascination and other affects triggered by the perceived motion in front of one’s eyes; on the other hand, narrative cinema could be said to engage the spectator at the symbolic level, where actions and gestures take on symbolic significance and narrative meaning. And just as the symbolic is enmeshed in the imaginary and thus does not oust or replace it, so the historical development of narrativity in film does not signal the abolishment of the affective force of nonnarrative, visual effects.

What then are the primary differences between the classical paradigm of cinema as narrative and the notion of a cinema of attractions? Gunning focuses on two interrelated aspects. One is a difference of temporality. Citing Roland Barthes and Russian Formalism, Gunning argues that the essential temporality of classical narrative depends on *suspension*. Narrative in its classical form works by presenting an enigma—or from a psychoanalytic perspective, establishing a *desire*—which demands some kind of solution or fulfilment. The art of narrative, then, consists of “delaying the resolution of that enigma, so that its final unfolding can be delivered as a pleasure long anticipated and well earned” (43). In contrast, the primary temporality of the cinema of attractions is one of immediacy, depending on affects like surprise and shock. Rather than steady build-up and suspense, attraction depends on immediate display and spectacle, a constant present that continuously says “Here it is! Look at it!” Thus if we take the example of Georges Méliès again, as John Frazer remarks, “We experience his films as rapidly juxtaposed jolts of activity. [...] Méliès’ films are a collage of immediate experiences which coincidentally require the passage of time to become complete” (124).

The second difference between classical narrative cinema and the cinema of attractions concerns the presence of the film viewer in relation to the film. Gunning points out that in the paradigm of classical narrative film, the pursuit of the initial narrative enigma “takes place within a detailed diegesis, a fictional world of places and characters in which the action of the narrative dwells” (43). “From a spectatorial point of view,” he continues,

the classical diegesis depends not only on certain basic elements of coherence and stability but also on the lack of acknowledgement of the spectator. As the psychoanalytically shaped theory of [Christian] Metz claims, this is a world that allows itself to be seen but that also refuses to acknowledge its complicity with a spectator. In the classical diegesis, the spectator is rarely acknowledged, an attitude exemplified by the stricture against the actor’s look or gestures at the camera/spectator. As Metz says, the classical spectator becomes modeled on the voyeur, who watches in secret, without the scene he watches acknowledging his presence. (43–44)

Narrative cinema, in other words, functions on the premise of an internal story-world reality *independent of* the spectator’s external reality.

In contrast, in the cinema of attractions the spectator’s presence is explicitly recognized by the film. The magic tricks in Méliès’ films, for example, are directed at the film’s spectators, and there is no sense in denying their presence. Gunning raises another example from 1896, *The Black Diamond Express* directed by James H. White, which opens with a shot of a locomotive coming straight towards the camera, so that the spectator

experiences the immediate terror of what it would be like to stare down an onrushing train. Important here is that the film does not yet set up an independent, diegetic reality into which viewers voyeuristically peer in—that is, a fictional reality that is *represented* on the screen—and instead, spectators are directly watching the film and its technologically embedded vision—a *presentational* effect in which the film is addressing the spectator directly.

Narrative in “The Tumor with a Human Face”

How then do we position Tanizaki and “The Tumor with a Human Face” in relation to the early history of film? Let us return for the moment to the “tension between affect and narrative” which LaMarre observes in Tanizaki’s short story. According to LaMarre, this tension emerges out of the unique structure of Tanizaki’s work involving a film within the story. Because much of the story involves descriptions of the film, what is particularly interesting is the way in which it sways back and forth between the film’s storyline and its remarkable cinematic effects.

“The Tumor with a Human Face” starts with Utagawa Yurie, an actress recently back in Japan after a stint in Hollywood, hearing rumors of an obscure film in which she plays the leading role but of which she has no memory of ever acting in. Yurie gets details about the mysterious movie from certain individuals familiar with the film, and learns not just about its storyline but also about its amazing use of cinematic techniques such as double exposure and montage, the quality of which are apparently outstanding, as well as about the film’s terrible effects on viewers. In the film, a courtesan Ayame Daifu (played by Yurie) and her American lover convince

a beggar who is in love with her to help her escape from her brothel, with the promise that later she will spend a night with him. After succeeding in a daring escape with the beggar's help, however, Ayame breaks her promise with him; in a fit of rage the betrayed beggar takes his own life vengefully cursing Ayame. As Ayame makes the long trip across the Pacific to start her new life in America, she develops a tumor on her knee that gradually takes on the appearance of the maniacal, laughing face of the ugly beggar. In America, she makes several attempts to find success and happiness, but her attempts are inevitably frustrated by the terrible tumor. The film ends with Ayame, driven to madness by the relentless tumor, committing suicide. The rumor surrounding this film is that when people watch it alone in a dark room, they become unable to rid their minds of the terrible image of the beggar's silent, laughing face superimposed on Yurie's knee, and eventually go mad themselves.

The film is shrouded in a number of mysteries, one of the strangest of which is the question of how such a film could have been made without the knowledge of its leading actress: Where does the footage of her come from? Could Yurie have forgotten that she played this role? One possible explanation is that the film was spliced together using footage from various other movies in which she appeared; another is that she had never been given details about the movie she was acting in:

In so far as she actually appeared in the flesh in the motion picture, she must have filmed it somewhere at some time or another. Nevertheless, she had no memory at all of acting in such a drama. When one acts in drama that are filmed for the screen, one does not follow the sequence

of events in order, as is conventional in stage theater, but rather one selects scenes from the play according to their convenience rather haphazardly, filming without concern for their order. With moving pictures, it so happens that, in many instances, an actor remains ignorant of the plot of the drama in which he is acting, filming in a single location at the same time two or three scenes from completely different plays. In particular with the Globe Company in which Yurie was employed, directors adopted a policy of keeping the actors entirely in the dark about the story. [...] For this reason, although Yurie had filmed a countless number of scenes during her few years with Globe, she herself could scarcely imagine at the time what sorts of drama the scenes would compose, or how many different narratives would be assembled. (Tanizaki 93)

The mysterious film in which Yurie appears in fact seems to be made up of scenes from films of various genres, involving Yurie as an Oriental courtesan in certain scenes, or as a seductive “dragon-lady” that tempts Western men in other scenes, or as a beautiful aristocratic lady in still other scenes. Thus footage intended for one film might have been used for the romantic scenes, footage intended for another for the courtesan’s daring escape from the Japanese brothel, and footage intended for still another for the European ball scene, and so on. Such pre-existing footage, it is explained, could have been superimposed and spliced with footage of other characters and, using sophisticated cinematic techniques as well as the right intertitles, an entirely new film could have been created.

This explanation that the haunted film could have been made without

the knowledge of its actors by combining other pre-existing scenes draws our attention to the mass-produced nature of movies in the 1910s, when genres were becoming increasingly standardized to create a familiar set of expectations for film audiences. In this context, typically movie characters were developed as easily recognizable generic character-types. For example, costumes and props often functioned more as denotational symbols than individualizing traits: Armor and a sword to signify a knight; a top-knot to indicate an Oriental male; a corpulent cigar-smoking male in a pin-striped suit to represent a fat-cat banker; a kimono for a Japanese courtesan. In other words, a standardized iconography of generic visual cues and symbols had by this time been established in film and, according to the logic of Tanizaki's short story, such visual cues and symbols could be taken apart and rearranged—that is, re-edited—to form a new cookie-cutter film. In this respect, we see that narrative is presented as a secondary aspect of film, thrown together from pre-existing footage using the basic techniques of montage and superimposition. We might say that the notion of cinematic narrative in Tanizaki's short story is not unlike Méliès' use of narrative as a convenient "pretext" for showcasing certain scenes, in this case a series of genre signifiers. This is Tanizaki's version of 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', where art is welded together on the factory line.

Virginia Woolf takes up a similar point in her 1926 essay on cinema which I quoted from earlier, when she discusses how films are adapted from works of literature, and laments what happens when film's clumsy visual signs cannot do justice to their original literary referents:

All the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters

and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films. What could be easier and simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples. The eye says 'Here is Anna Karenina.' A voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls comes before us. But the brain says, 'That is no more Anna Karenina than it is Queen Victoria.' [...] So we lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world. So we spell them out in words of one syllable, written, too, in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy. A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse. None of these things has the least connexion with the novel that Tolstoy wrote [...]. (349–350)

Woolf here captures the inadequacy of cinema's language of generic visual symbols for approximating the nuances of works of literature, and presents a damning assessment of the cinema as a *narrative* art, especially in the case of literature-to-film adaptations.

Likewise for Tanizaki as it was for Woolf, we see that narrative was a secondary element of film, very often something clumsily spliced together within the limits allowed by the developing Hollywood genre system. The emerging code of visual language through which cinematic narrative was formed had to be a matter of clear and precise symbols, without room for subtlety or polysemy: A kiss is love; a broken cup jealousy; a grin is happiness; and death is a hearse. Narrative cinema for both Tanizaki and Woolf, we see, was more often than not a matter of clumsy signs and

referents.

Microperceptual Affect in “The Tumor with the Human Face”

Nonetheless, Tanizaki, as well as Woolf, was fascinated by film. Despite its ineptness as a narrative medium, both writers were keenly aware of film’s affective force and power to enrapture its audiences. Joseph and Barbara Anderson have famously written about the double logic that accompanies us when we watch films, summarizing something similar to Tanizaki’s experience of film. On the one hand, they write, “We know that the individual pictures of a motion picture are not really moving, and that our perception of motion is therefore an illusion.” On the other hand, they also point out, “To the visual system, the motion in a motion picture is real motion” (quoted in Wood 5). In other words, understanding the technology behind the illusion does not undermine the illusion: We know that our eyes are being tricked, yet we suspend that knowledge and allow our perception to be immersed and embedded in the machinic experience. The fascination of film for Tanizaki is what happens at this microperceptual level of machinic vision. In the following passage from “The Tumor with a Human Face,” Yurie’s friend M explains the strange power that movies can have on people when they watch them alone:

In M’s long experience with moving pictures, to watch a film with a crowd of spectators at theaters in Asakusa Park with music and vaudeville banter produces feelings of exhilaration and merriment, but to watch a film all alone in a dark room without sound or dialogue somehow causes ghostly and quite uncanny sensations. This is true of

course with quiet, desolate images, yet even with scenes of banquets and skirmishes, as the images of so many people in action flicker, you feel not so much that they are lifeless but rather you have the sensation that you who watch, you yourself are about to vanish. (99)

Here M suggests that, especially when one is completely alone in a dark movie theatre, the constructed reality on the screen takes on a reality that is more real than one's own, so that the spectator's self-presence is completely lost and "you yourself are about to vanish." In LaMarre's words, "Watching highly animated scenes, one feels that the life force of film is far greater than one's own" (106). We are reminded again of Woolf's description of the film-viewing experience: Watching a series of scenes involving various people and objects, she writes,

They have become not more beautiful in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life? We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. (349)

We see then that for both Tanizaki and Woolf, the true potential of film lies in its ability to create a seamless illusory reality and a state of complete immersion, so that viewers are *absorbed* by the film to a point that they seem to disappear. Important to note here is that this absorption is not an effect of narrative in the sense of, say, how Christian Metz understands suture. For

Tanizaki and Woolf, absorption is not a contemplative, active engagement with the film's narrative, but rather a passive receptive engagement, in which the film takes over ones sensory mode of being.

In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* Mary Anne Doane reminds us of the strange reality we inhabit when we watch a film, further developing the idea that the movement we perceive in film is in fact an illusion constructed by discrete frames flickering in front of our eyes coming from a projector positioned behind us. Furthermore, Doane points out that it is our brains that do the actual work of illusion, connecting the spaces between frames and creating the continuity of movement to create what she calls the internal "real time" of film. "This temporal continuity," she writes, "is in fact haunted by absence, by lost time represented by the division between frames. During the projection of a film, the spectator is sitting in an unperceived darkness for almost 40 percent of running time" (172). This is a provocative idea, to think that our brains do not just connect together the discrete images flickering on the screen, but also *erase* from experience the gaps between those images. In the passages quoted above, both Tanizaki and Woolf seem to suggest a similar experience, in which the brain becomes so immersed in the construction of the cinematic reality that it threatens to blot out completely from perception the external reality which the film viewer physically inhabits. Not only does the viewer sit in an "unperceived darkness," Tanizaki and Woolf suggest that the viewer affectively eliminates his or her own existence from perceived reality: this is the example par excellence of the technologically embedded nature of perception.

Doane's point regarding "unperceived darkness" suggests that the human sensory capacity to exclude is a dynamic aspect of the construction

of cinematic reality and is fundamental to the techno-somatics of film. But what happens when sensory exclusion fails, and the embedding of mind in film is undermined? For an example of such an instance, again we can look to Woolf. After describing the adaptation of *Anna Karenina* and seemingly despairing of film as a narrative art, Woolf proceeds to describe an experience that revealed for her the true potential of film:

But what, then, are its [film's] devices? If it ceased to be a parasite [of literature through adaptation], how would it walk erect? At present it is only from hints that one can frame any conjecture. For instance, at a performance of *Dr. Caligari* the other day a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement 'I am afraid'. In fact, the shadow was accidental and the effect unintentional. But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression. Terror has besides its ordinary forms the shape of a tadpole; it burgeons, bulges, quivers, disappears. Anger is not merely rant and rhetoric, red faces and clenched fists. It is perhaps a black line wriggling upon a white sheet. Anna and Vronsky need no longer scowl and grimace. They have

at their command—but what? Is there, we ask, some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye? Is there any characteristic which thought possesses that can be rendered visible without the help of words? (350–351)

What are we to make of Woolf's strange, almost bizarre, cinematic experience? She is watching *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene's 1920 horror classic, but it is not the tale of the mysterious asylum director and the murderous somnambulist Cesare that affects Woolf, but instead a momentary mechanical accident, when some kind of blot or smudge on the film reel is suddenly magnified on the screen over a brief series of frames. Why should the brief tadpole-like shadow have affected Woolf so?

From a psychoanalytic perspective the tadpole is none other than an instance of *objet petit a*, a glimpse of the real, where the symbolic, diegetic reality of the film is momentarily disrupted by a non-symbolic shape that defies any possibility of meaning. The tadpole is an object external to the diegetic film reality presented through the screen, and yet it appears on the screen in front of her eyes. Woolf writes that “the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression,” but here she has lost the point. The tadpole-like shadow unsettles Woolf precisely because it is not a symbol and does not signify any particular emotion or affect. Rather, it affects Woolf because for a brief moment it reveals—even though she does not consciously recognize it as such—the technical mechanics behind the constructed story-world reality of cinema. The tadpole betrays the wizard behind the screen—the rapid mechanics of the projector flashing 24 times a second, so fast that a tiny blot will magnify

to enormous proportions over the course of perhaps a single second and threaten to engulf the entire screen. If, as Doane suggests, cinema depends on our unconscious ability to repress or erase from experience the darkness between frames and our physical surroundings, then the appearance of the tadpole marks the breakdown of that primordial repression, a hole in the symbolic order. It is not that the shape of the tadpole is in itself a signifier of fear, but rather that its sudden, arbitrary appearance jolted Woolf out of her immersion in the diegetic reality of *Dr. Caligari*. The tadpole emerges in a liminal space, neither a part of the fictional reality within the film nor completely belonging to the outside reality of the audience sitting in the movie theatre.

Woolf's experience suggests that the techno-somatic exclusion of "unperceived darkness" on which the illusion of cinematic motion depends in fact parallels and manifests our psychic exclusion of the pre-Symbolic, primordial other (that is, *objet petit a*, the "small" *autre*, not to be confused with the "big" Other of the Symbolic). As Jacques Lacan theorized, the consistency of our experience of reality depends on the primordial exclusion of the real from that reality. Thus Woolf's experience suggests that the techno-somatic logic of film in its "proper" working state materializes and manifests our engagement with reality at the Imaginary and Symbolic levels: it is through excluding our immediate surroundings (in a theater, facing a silver screen, surrounded by darkness up to 40 percent of the time) that we can both limit and thereby construct a cinematic reality. The movie screen in effect serves as the material manifestation of the psychic boundary between two Symbolic realities, that of the film and that of the movie theatre, (not unlike the TV screen in *Ring*), and hence the collapse of the screen must

result in a return of the real.

How, then, are technological and psychic exclusion relevant for Tanizaki? In fact, the climactic moment of terror in the haunted film in “The Tumor with a Human Face” occurs precisely when exclusion fails. The moment of terror occurs as the film technician M immerses himself in the film, watching it alone in a dark room. Here is how Yurie’s friend H describes the scene of her character’s suicide at the end of the film, and the strange effect it had for M as well as various others who had watched the film alone:

That scene has a close-up of the lower half of your right knee to toenails, and the tumor protruding from your knee displays its most poignant expression, its lips twisted in a laugh so peculiar that it seemed on the verge of anguish, as if it were utterly obsessed. Suddenly, quite faintly, came the sound of its laughter, and faint though it was, they could hear it, without the shadow a doubt. (100)

This is a remarkable scene when we consider that Tanizaki was writing in 1918, fully a decade before the release of *The Jazz Singer*, as if he were foreseeing the eventual development of talkie technology. Nonetheless, for Tanizaki, film was a visual medium, the effect of which depended on the exclusion of sound and color. The emergence of sound—not in the form of meaningful dialogue but as laughter no less—marks a moment of pure horror in which the primordial repression that is the basis of one’s access to a film’s internal reality breaks down. For the tumor’s laugh, again, is *objet petit a* directly addressing the film viewer from the space of the pre-Symbolic other. What I mean is that the tumor’s silent laugh is a prime

example of a “partial object,” the voice of the primordial other that must be repressed and excluded for normal access to reality. We recall that voice and gaze are the two elements Lacan added to Sigmund Freud’s list of “partial objects” (the others being breasts, feces, and phallus). As partial objects, of course they are not on the side of the perceiving subject, but on the side of what the subject perceives. But the point is that they are *a priori* objects, always already confronting us from the position of the pre-Symbolic primordial other. When the address of the primordial other—whether it be a gaze directed at us from a blind spot, or the voice of an absent speaker, or the laughter of a silent face—is not properly repressed and excluded from reality, the outcome is none other than psychosis—hearing voices and seeing specters.

Immersing oneself in a silent, black-and-white film, Tanizaki suggests, is dependent on repressing one’s capacity to hear and to see in color. And the psychosis which overcomes the viewers of the haunted film, therefore, comes in the form of a techno-somatic return of the repressed. The microperceptual, existential question Tanizaki leaves unanswered at the end of his short story, therefore, is whether the failure to repress the tumor’s laughter is purely psychic or purely machinic, that is, whether M’s psychosis is a sensory or technological phenomenon. The only possible answer to this question is that these two modes of being—sensory and technological, somatic and machinic—cannot be unraveled from each other, that the cinema is a technologically embedded sensory mode of perception. In Tanizaki’s formulation, the experience of cinema finally collapses the possibility of distance between viewing subject and viewed object. Film is not an “external” object to look at and contemplate, but rather an experience in

which the subject immerses him or herself, and thereby allows subjectivity itself to be technologically embedded.

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