

KINUGASA TEINOSUKE. ANOTHER INTERPRETATION OF THE EXPRESSIONIST INTENTIONS OF THE DIRECTOR OF „PAGE OF MADNESS“

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Настоящата статия разглежда модернистичните опити и нетрадиционните за своето време похвати в киното на японския режисьор Тейносуке Кинугаса. В центъра на изследването стои филмът му “Страница лудост” (прев. М. Василева). Смятан за един от първите представители на експресионизма в японското кино, режисьорът се заема с не леката задача да представи на японската аудитория едно ново течение, пречупено през неговия поглед. Много критици разглеждат симбиозата между западната традиция и японската естетика, намерили място и в този ням филм, но малко са изследователите, които търсят и чисто личния подход и умения на Кинугаса.

According to the greater part of the Japanese film critics most of the Japanese film directors of the 1920's were to some extent influenced by the Western tradition. The Western industrial society with its class struggle produced a quite realistic system of representation. The more it was opposed to the 'feudal capitalists' the more the Japanese directors were attracted to it. Such a film-maker was Kinugasa Teinosuke, representative of the so-called *Shinkankaku-ha* (*School of New Perceptions*). His silent film 'Page of Madness' (*Kurutta ichipeiji* or *Kurutta ippeiji*) was hailed as an avant-garde work of genius comparable in its artistic daring to examples of German expressionism, such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, or of surrealism, such as Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*. Perhaps more important, it was viewed as something of an outlier in the development of film art in the 1920's, and, as such, was treated as an anomaly or puzzle that could be used to support a variety of contestable conclusions about the history of cinema (Washburn 2010, 368–372).

Kinugasa Teinosuke

Kinugasa was born in 1896 and died in 1982. He came from a well-to-do merchant family. As a boy, his mother often took him to the theatre and as an adolescent he acted in school plays. Kinugasa entered the cinema as an *onnagata* (a man who specializes in female roles), signing up with Nikkatsu in 1917 and playing about 130 films (all of them lost) until 1922, when he left Nikkatsu in protest with all their *onnagata actors* when the production firm started employing actresses.

He directed his first film for Nikkatsu in 1920, in which he also played the female lead. He became a director for Makino in 1923 and gave up acting for good in the same year. 'Page of Madness' was his 35th film – he was a highly experienced director at that time, aged 30, and the few surviving fragments from works prior to 'Page of Madness' look very convincing.

Kinugasa was influenced by the European film and is said to have managed to transform the Hollywood codes into what he believed to be advanced European approach. He managed to produce several silent features until the industry began to change after the infamous 1923 earthquake which leveled Tokyo and killed thousands of people. The quake also signaled the beginning of an unprecedented influx of Western ideas into Japan which had remained years behind the rest of the world. Modern buildings rose from the rubble, and European ideologies became fashionable among Japan's intellectuals. Japanese cinema began changing rapidly, as well, and films were directly influenced by European directors. In 1926 Kinugasa founded his own independent production company in Kyoto, a city which remained until the Pacific War, a film-making center as important as Tokyo. The same year he produced his masterpiece 'Page of Madness' (Kurutta Ippeiji, 1926). The scenario was written in collaboration with the young and promising then Kawabata Yasunari. 'Page of Madness' is widely credited as the first mature Japanese avant-garde film, and one of the finest examples of international experimental cinema. But it is true that some film critics relate it to the Japanese aesthetics, too.

The setting is an asylum for the insane. An elderly man, a former sailor, works voluntarily at odd jobs there. His wife is confined to the lunatic asylum after having attempted to drown her baby son in a fit of madness many years ago.

The movie honestly depicts a rather unpleasant subject and gives a subjective view of the hero's surrealistic world. The film was entirely self-funded, which almost broke Kinugasa. Fortunately, it was a surprising box-office success, and he eventually went abroad and studied under Eisenstein in the Soviet Union. Upon his return to Japan, Kinugasa settled into a prolific career as a studio director, and during his long career that ended in 1977, Kinugasa directed 116 films. Such a prolific filmography is not that unusual for a director who started in 1920 and worked for over four decades.

The Economic Situation in Japan in 1920's

Before stating the unique and up-to date art qualities of the film a brief view on the economic situation in Japan would add a more profound touch to the whole picture. The Japanese cinema at the time was unable to assert the naturalness that gradually evolved in the films of the West between 1905 and 1915. There were commercial and technological reasons, a lag in organizing the industry and problems with machines and films. A typical feature of the Japanese film was the employment of male actors – *onnagata*, for the female characters. Another hindrance was that the Japanese cinema was considered an extension of the theater and used a *narrator* to explain the film to the audience. Called the *benshi*, the narrator eliminated printed titles, so the Japanese cinema developed its own cinematic grammar and rhetoric. It became dependent upon the *benshi* so that the film did not need to “speak “ in its own unique style. The *benshi* were both beloved and rewarded. In the advertisements of the period, their names were often larger than the titles of the films they were ostensibly accompanying.

When the World War II broke, much of Japan's cinematic history went up in flames and was destroyed. A curious and fascinating survivor of the war was that the original negative of 'Page of Madness' survived because Kinugasa had stored the negative in a rice barrel in his country home.

The Film and Its Credit to the Development of the Japanese Cinema

What is important about the film is the fact that except the contemporary setting (a lunatic asylum), Kinugasa and Kawabata used

actresses for the roles, not *onnagata*. They also tried to abandon the so called *benshi*. As N. Burch says ‘Page of Madness’ could easily have graced a German or French film of the late 1920s.’ The impressionistic atmosphere strikes the audience from the very beginning of the film and is reminiscent of the sophistication of the European film.

The readings of ‘Page of Madness’ stress the film’s surrealism through the sick wife’s psychosis. Subjectivity is represented from the inside out. The diseased interiority of the patient is expressed in terms of cinematic strategies: spinning camera movement, breakneck montage, crimping, overlays etc.

The work is quite modern for its time with Kinugasa’s preoccupation with conjoining the de-constructing and structuring processes. There are few episodes that reveal that sort of ambiguity: three times in the film the hero, an old man, who works in an asylum, looks out of the window of his room in the mental institution. But what he sees are ultimately only his... memories. We can trace a great many examples of this unique manner of assembling and disassembling the things. This is another expressionistic method of Kinugasa, which is modern and well used by him at that time.

For example the movie opens with the chaotic falling of the rain, which bears a stormy feeling of disorder, and there follows immediately an image of a drum, rhythmically measuring the beat of the rain. We have an unusual linking between chaos and rhythm. In the very beginning we also find the image of a crazily rotating color ball and then another slow down of the tempo with the image of a circus player, dancing elegantly and calmly in front of the ball. A white road and a dog running quickly ahead of a dark figure and then a white sleeve of an asylum patient, sitting silently behind the black bars of the institution. That is the Kinugasa’s way to convey the feelings of the nameless heroes of the film in an individual expressionistic manner, or rather the way he perceives impressionism. ‘As it is with these poor people, so it is with us – this is a part of the expressionist message. A man, a woman, a daughter – people in expressionist narratives have no names. We all live in an asylum for this is what the world is – this is the same explicit message as in *Caligari*’ (D. Richie).

“Watching the film was a troubling experience, because very strong emotions and visual effects hit you, but there are no means of understanding exactly what is going on, nor why the film is like it is – and all that I found

very irritating”. That is what the famous Mariann Lewinsky, Swiss film historian and specialist of Japanese Silent Cinema, says about the film (Lewinsky 2002).

N. Burch writes: “The mood-setting ‘impressionistic’ introduction was, in its general outlines, already part of the codes of sophisticated European films (such as those of the great Lupu-Pick or Delluc) (Burch 1979: 129). The critic points out a number of things, which struck the attention of the observer with its modernistic tinge at the very beginning of the film: rain at night, close-up of a window, a door bangs in the wind, a car’s headlights come towards camera, two barred windows in chiaroscuro interior, a telegraph pole scarcely visible in the dark, etc. (Burch 1979: 128). However there are some ‘singularities’ ‘incompatible’ with the standard Western approach. Usually the ‘human centre’ is marked by the appearance of a human being, but here the man and the car before him vanish and never return.

”Visually the film (photographed by Sugiyama Kohei, the cameraman who also went on to win Kinugasa his various prizes for *Gate of Hell*), owes much to German expressionist film: night-time lighting, lots of reflections, rain-soaked sets, shadows, urban menace. Kinugasa, in authentic expressionist style urged the inclusion of logically irrelevant but emotionally evocative scenes – a broken rice bowl, a rain-soaked cat – and so often interrupted the narrative that the audience had to bring its own subjectivity to assist in the interpretation. It is the story’s intent, for example, that one of the insane should “hear” music in a silent film. This is done by juxta-positioning musical instruments over the patient’s image, suggesting that her (the patient’s) impressions should be ours and our experience of the asylum should be hers.

Very emblematic is the scene with the female patient who dances in her cell and the crowd of male patients who come to watch, fighting for position. The scene undoes the hospital rules as a rebellious and sexual energy is unleashed. Film critics pay attention to the sexual differences here. For the female patient it is the desire to dance which persists from her world outside from the hospital. For the men it is the reactionary and violent libidinal response. A stunning invocation of the world as viewed by the mentally ill, within minutes, as the rapid montage of the opening storm sequences dissolves into the surrealistic fantasy of the sailor’s wife dressed

in an exotic costume dancing in front of art-deco inspired backdrop featuring a large spinning ball flanked by ornate fountains, 'Page of Madness' bowls the viewers over with a barrage of startling images utilising every technique in the book known to filmmakers of the time.

Yet another moment that draws the attention of film critics and observers is the episode with the Noh masks. The old sailor imagines himself to be laughing happily bringing a basket full of masks to the inmates and handing them out. This is a quite unusual ending, which puzzles the mind of the Western viewers, because according to the Western cultures a mask is an accessory that hides the horrible truth and it is often associated with the false beauty. But Y. Kawabata, on the other hand, says the episode functions indeed as an imagined happy end (and in the longer original version it worked as an indication of the happy end to be, the marriage of her daughter and her fiance).

"The moment the patients don the masks their obsessively rhythmic movements stop; they relax. Then the old sailor puts a mask on his deranged wife's brooding face and dons one himself. A beautiful close-up shows man and wife with their radiant masks – hers softly smiling, his wrinkled but happy laughter – the image of a couple united, an image of happiness" (Lewinsky 2002).

The film, however, was severely criticized and ended up in failure. Yet Kinugasa made another film 'Crossways' (Jujiro 1928), which was far more faithful to the Hollywood and European codes. With regard to its images it is often compared to the traditional Japanese ink-painting (*sumi-e*). The hero, a poor *ronin*, and his complex fantasies recall the complexity of 'Page of Madness'. 'Crossroads' (Jujiro 1928), indicated how an imported style could be nationalized. The linkage between scenes is often, in the Japanese manner, neither logical nor causal but emotional.

Here the expressionist intentions are mainly in the sets – huge settings, which recreate Japan's feudal era with lots of night, shadows, smoke and steam. The wounded hero, lost in the capital, wants water and crawls from his bedding only to find himself in a Fritz-Lang-like space with enormous casks half buried and full of water when he tries to drink.

Later in his life Kinugasa also made masterpieces like 'The Summer Battle of Osaka' (Osaka Natsu no Jin 1932), 'The Actress' (Joyu 1947), 'The Gate of Hell' (Jigokumon 1952). But 'Page of Madness' is and will

be the Japanese contribution to the international avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, and also the participation of cinema in the Japanese avant-garde movement.

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