

NATHANAËL

THE SOLITARY DEATHS OF MIZOGUCHI KENJI

Make away.

If I stop at a single sentence as at an image, emptying the page of its signs having suddenly become superfluous, or else propelling themselves like a current, displacing the exact frame of a philosophical convention, what is given, to me as to anyone, and in any case, abducts and assigns me, in the manner of a dream, sometimes terrifically, and having arisen in a film, where, in the position of the only spectator, which is to say multiply, I become the mute witness, not by choice and therefore incidentally, and as a result by *accident*, and from reel to reel, of the *solitary deaths* of Mizoguchi Kenji, such as they arise in the thinking of Gilles Deleuze, suspended between the eddies of otherwise rhetoric, the seizure of movement, its temporality, whereas it falls under the purview of no language, ultimately, the desire to say so, nor the name of the filmmaker, it is the words themselves detached from the density of a cine-philosophy,¹ as of an unverifiable truth, in other words driven by what it is given to see, without in fact wanting to, and in the margins of its own limits. The “solitary deaths” of Mizoguchi are females, all, and without a doubt, it is not enough to enumerate them, nor to catalogue the films fallen from the history of cinema, including the castaways, bodiless and named, to each its grave, the late cinema, from film to fire, starting at the insolite, and already much discussed, post-war image of an impotent goddess of christianity, abandoned to her shame, and looking down from her stone tower in the stomach of the ruined church, and by the dulled brilliance of its devitrified stain, onto the square where the night women are warring, *a posteriori*, under a voiceless icon and so with nothing more than a syphillitic promise that rejects the occidental prayer implanted in Ōsaka, a presumptuous compassion, but human matter reduced to its voluminous dust.² If, as the filmmaker affirms in his work notes, “emotion is needed, not a commentary,”³ one must question the aptness of verbiage intent on circumscribing the mechanism calling for flight, into the netting of language, the senses in question, the sequence shot of scarcely a thought because reduced to the silence by which it unravels. This silence, made plural, bears name of city and body of sector, from Kyōto to Ōsaka, and from Gion to Shinsekai, exfoliating the eras as the ages, from Heian

1 Gilles Deleuze. *L'image-mouvement*. Minuit. Paris, 1983 (265). All translations from the French in this text are by Nathanaël.

2 *Yoru no onna tachi*—in English as *Women of the Night*, 1948.

3 Yoda Yoshikata, *Souvenirs de Kenji Mizoguchi*, tr. Koichi Yamada, et al. Cahiers du Cinéma. Paris, 1997 (107).

to Showa, and lingering over Meiji. The “solitary deaths”⁴ of Mizoguchi Kenji are females, all, and each dies in the eye of the cinema, under the invisible hands of convention, and in the flames of loves betrayed by their armatures, in other words the sensible stare of the filmmaker, turned over under a fragile lid, the mists of the fogged film strip. The concentric circles descend, infernal, from lowliness to lowliness, effacing themselves as assiduously as they are produced, the body as much as the face, abandoned to the grating city or the deported song of a mother or a lover. As much as these names are posthumously conceded to the screen scansioning their solitude, the individual subjects of the cinematic narratives prove themselves to be isolated inside the swell of history, an inexorable detainment as given affliction. Because *death*, without fail, is a sort of murder, decanted in time, with as its foil the devastated permanence (that of war and prostitution, conjugal or illicit). The final gaze carried over the reeds onto the end of Oyūsama,⁵ committed against her own person, bespeaks the absolute limit of a subjectivity that reveals itself to be absence of a possible limit, and renunciation of succession, of all intimate bonds with the world such as it is refused her. World without *I* to which the filmmaker bequeaths himself in aparté at the approach of the philosopher, giving resonance to the lines of Sōseki Natsume when, at the death of a friend, he writes :

Those chrysanthemums
That you find, cast them all down
In the coffin deep⁶

In Mizoguchi there is no coffin, but a hollow world, doubled over on the riverbanks, at the edge of a shallow island, or an uncrossable road, and even when its reach extends beyond a funerary mound, the gaze past an avowable lie, the body, weighted, loses face and the

4 The published English-language translation of *L'image-mouvement* renders “mort solitaire” as “lonely death” (196). Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I, The Movement-Image*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. The Athlone Press. London, 1986 [1983].

5 *Oyū-sama*—in English as *Miss Oyu*, 1951.

6 Sōseki Natsume. *Inside my glass doors*, tr. Sammy L. Tsunematsu. Tuttle. North Clarendon (VT), 2002. These lines are dedicated to keishū writer Ōtsuka Kusuo (1875-1910). An essayist, poet and fiction writer, she was the author of *Sora daki* (Incense burner).

present can only resorb itself in time. Notably when the last shot joins the first, to the point of irrerecognizability, for not being *the same*.⁷ The horizon is an ache, and its dizziness evinces a vertical incompleteness, free fall of a statufied vision,⁸ a pall made ever more appalling for its obstinacy.⁹

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During an interview granted after the death of the filmmaker by screenwriter Yoda Yoshikata, the latter interprets a calligraphy written in Mizoguchi's hand : "You see, this *tense* (calligraphy) is comprised of four characters, the first of which is simply the drawing of an eye. The four together signify 'With each new look, one must wash one's eyes.' ..."¹⁰ Mizoguchi's mortuary mask was donated to Henri Langlois, and is today among the archives of the Cinémathèque française at Bercy. The mask, congealed skin, not only of the face of the filmmaker, but effigy of his own "solitary death," consolidates the concatenation of demises dissolved in his films, into the mute absorption of Anju,¹¹ silenced to save her brother Zushio, sinking in the exact place where the extinguished voice of the philosopher waits. In what does the gaze assume the form of what it sees itself beseeching. If all of these deaths, said to be solitary, captured only to be evacuated, cast themselves each individually onto a female body without an actual world, one must believe, with Mizoguchi, placed under the eye of Deleuze, in their declension for all time, in the feminine. Whereas the impossibility of seeing and the reversal of the knowledge upon which this thinking rests. The "solitary deaths" of Mizoguchi Kenji under the ensign Gilles Deleuze are nothing other than the self-less appeal to the transgendered world having fled the body thus designated.

--Chicago, 2017

7 *Ugetsu monogatari*—in English as *Ugetsu*, 1953.

8 *Yōkihi*—in English as *Princess Yang Kwang-Fei*, 1955.

9 *Tōkyō kōshinkyoku*—in English as *Tokyo March*, 1929.

10 *Mizoguchi, Cahiers du cinéma*, hors série, September, 1964.

11 *Sanshō Dayū*—*Sansho the Bailiff*, 1954.