



John Graham, *Sound of the Mountain*, pigment print on paper and accompanying text, 2015.

1.

The Japanese director Mikio Naruse made dramas of everyday life, a genre known in Japan as *Shomin-geki*. Though referred to as ‘dramas’, his films are not dramatic in a conventional sense. What action there is unfolds within subtle details, a language of small gestures, described by Audie Bock as, “The art of the sidelong glance.” (1) Naruse made *Sound of the Mountain* in 1954. Isolated from the flow of the film, this still image of Kikuko (played by Setsuko Hara) might be erotic, poignant, ecstatic, or mournful. The moment is significant for the character, though she may not realise this yet.

2.

I’ve watched the film already so I know how things work out. All films have this curious quality; of time passing that is already past. Very little happens in a Naruse film, you might say they are constructed around events that don’t take place. In *Sound of the Mountain* the moment represented by this still image acts as a kind of portent, a letting go that prefigures a more painful one later on. It is the axis upon which everything and nothing turns.

3.

The image contains a figure we can’t see. Or more accurately, the scene does. We believe the world of the film exists beyond the frame, continuing beyond the edge of the screen in our mind’s eye. Characters also exist beyond what we can see immediately in front of us, in the lateral extension of the narrative, and in close-ups, by a movement inwards, towards the hidden.

4.

One way of thinking about the image is that the towel covering Kikuko’s face is a mask. In Japanese, *Omote* refers both to face and mask, the coincidence of meaning hinting at an inscrutability of facial expression. The towel, or mask, represents her physical beauty at one remove, the outer layer of a more complex personality underneath. Her beauty is made more intense for being hidden.

5.

Known as 'The eternal virgin' in Japan, Setsuko Hara embodied a sense of integrity and old-fashioned innocence. Donald Richie wrote, "On the screen, she did not disturb harmony, she created it, and in this harmony she found herself." (2) Directing her in some of her finest roles, Yasujiro Ozu insisted that the character of the actor themselves is what counted, "In casting it is not a matter of skillfulness or lack of skill ... it is what an actor is." (3)

6.

Setsuko Hara's feelings were concealed within a reticent manner, her reserve producing an inner vibration, a current of feeling beneath the surface of the skin. This withholding, paradoxically, became a sounding board, a powerful amplifier of emotion.

7.

Japanese audiences identified with Setsuko Hara in a special way. Modest but resilient, her pragmatic characters didn't transcend their circumstances but tried to find a way through them. In post war Japan she became an emblem of a previous era. With beauty and bearing reminiscent of an earlier time, she represented a longing for the past combined with recognition of the impossibility of returning.

8.

In *Noh* theatre the folding fan is an important device. An intermediary between actor and audience, it conceals outward expression while signaling something deeper. The towel that Setsuko Hara holds to her face also has a dual function, concealing her face in the moment while receiving the imprint of her moment to come.

9.

An old friend visits Kikuko's father-in-law at his office. A small wooden box is placed upon the desk. The visitor carefully removes the cloth wrapping from a *Noh* mask. A secretary enters and is asked to wear the mask. It's an uncanny moment and the men are transfixed. Later that evening the father-in-law wakes from his sleep. Padding along the corridor he notices a light. Looking inside the small room he finds Kikuko holding a cloth to her upturned face.

10.

In his short text *The Face of Garbo*, Roland Barthes defines the face of the actress as 'an idea', and writes how this idea "Was not to have any reality except that of its perfection." (4) Barthes links the power of this 'idea' to Garbo's early retirement and famous reclusiveness. Comparable to Garbo, Setsuko Hara also portrayed a kind of perfection. In 1963 – to the despair of her numerous fans – she retired from acting into a private life she has maintained ever since.

11.

During the Heian period (794 – 1185) Japanese emperors often abdicated to enter monasteries and live out their days in peace and contemplation. Setsuko Hara retired from acting in 1963, the same year that Yasujiro Ozu died. She wasn't dead, but like the great director she also disappeared from view. A cube of black marble serves as Ozu's gravestone. It contains a single character, *Mu*, usually translated as 'nothingness'. Setsuko Hara's disappearing act was her most perfect performance.

12.

In his documentary film *Tokyo-ga*, Wim Wenders visits Ozu's grave and is perplexed by its inscription, its blunt declaration of 'nothing'. How can something so great become nothing? Ozu's grave is in Kamakura, where Setsuko Hara has lived since her retirement. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June this year she celebrated her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday.

13.

I'm not sure when I first saw Setsuko Hara. Yasujiro Ozu and Mikio Naruse were fascinating directors but I wasn't interested in the actors. I like to project films (I think it was John Berger who said that the difference between a projected film and a film on TV is like the difference between looking at the sky and looking into a cupboard.) One night in my studio I was projecting a film when gradually, and then, in the funny way these things can happen, very suddenly, she appeared to me.

14.

In her influential text, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Laura Mulvey writes, "The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce". (5) This analogy might be extended to suggest that the membrane of the screen, bearer of infinite depths, is also a membrane of skin, bearing the complex depths beneath the surface, not of 'objects', as Mulvey suggests, but of the actors who portray them. Setsuko Hara's play of hiding and revealing is not flirtatious; it is the result of a tension between her role as an actor and her reality as a human being.

15.

Naruse's characters are always moving, even within the confines of the family home they constantly come and go. But this inexorable momentum is not the dynamics of progress. It doesn't serve to advance the plot, or to bring the characters to some sort of resolution. Underscored by anxiety and doubt, these circular movements suggest an uncertainty of direction, a crisis of faith. The viewer is enfolded within these repetitions, as they extend and reverberate through the time of the film.

16.

A film-still is separated from the flow of images making up the overall narrative. Singled out for attention, the still image is sedimented with meaning while simultaneously ripe for new meaning. This moment of potential, while palpable, is checked against what is already present. Dwelling on the indexical link between subject and object in the photograph – how the photograph contains, "The being of the model of which it is the reproduction" – Andre Bazin is struck by the ghost-like presence, "of lives halted at a set moment in their duration." (6) The figure in the photograph becomes embalmed in time. Stopped within the flow of the narrative, the flow of time, the still image takes on the temporal register of a photograph. The possibility of renewed momentum for the still-image is countered by the dying energy at its heart.

17.

Cinema combines two human fascinations – the animation of inanimate objects, and the boundary between life and death. Extracted from the continuum, the still image is trapped in a time continually receding away from us. Raymond Bellour writes, "The pause of the image asserts the power of stillness to enthrall, if this expression is so strong, it must be because it touches the stop of death." (7)

John Graham – September 2015

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Notes:

1. Audie Bock, Artforum (November, 2005)
2. Donald Richie, from Criterion Collection's 2006 DVD release, *Late Spring*.
3. Donald Richie, *The Later Films of Yasujiro Ozu*, Film Quarterly, 13 (1959) p22
4. Roland Barthes, from *The Face of Garbo in Mythologies*, Vintage (2000), p57 (first published Paris, 1957)
5. Laura Mulvey – *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 'Screen' Volume 16 no. 3 (1975)
6. Andre Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, reprinted in Braudy and Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, Oxford University Press (2004) p169
7. Raymond Bellour, *L'Entr'images: photo, cinema, video* (Paris 2002) p13