

**The Fifty Year War: *Rashomon*, *After Life*,
and Japanese Film Narratives of Remembering**

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The end of the twentieth-century coincided with a rush of academic and artistic works focusing upon, appropriately, the theme of memory and commemoration, in particular of the key events surrounding World War II, such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

This paper examines questions concerning war memory--both individual and collective--as they are presented in the 1950 Kurosawa Akira film classic, *Rashomon*¹ and Kore-eda Hirokazu's 1998 *After Life*.² I read the Occupation-era film allegorically, as a sign of the ongoing problem concerning acknowledgement of Japanese war responsibility, while later analyzing it philosophically; that is, as an example of an unresolved epistemological crisis in modernity. The contemporary film *After Life* suggests that, fifty years after *Rashomon*, the problem of memory remains unresolved as seen in the inability of contemporary Japanese to grapple sufficiently with wartime responsibility.

Although both films treat, I believe, the theme of war and memory rather directly, I examine their narrative forms as a sign of their philosophic significance. In other words, the ways in which the films' structure--as film narratives--acts of remembering reveals what may be called an epistemology of memory. In short, I believe that the problem of memory posed in the films not only relate to the question of war responsibility, but to larger questions regarding the unstable nature of modern knowledge itself, the relationship between images and history as modern acts of knowing. Stating differently, philosophically speaking, modernity itself may have a "memory problem." Both films problematize these issues in terms of the possibility or not of film narrative to convey, to visualize, truth content.

But first of all, why discuss *Rashomon*, a film, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival over fifty years ago? Following a provocative

¹ Directed by Kurosawa Akira. 87 minutes. Daiei Studios, (1950).

² Directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda. 118 minutes. Engine Films, (1998).

interpretation of the condition of postwar Germany by Eric Santner in his book, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*, I contend that postwar Japan has not yet faced, or yet worked through, its own traumatic loss. Loss here being defined as the sudden rupture of national identity once mobilized for total war under Emperor and imperial ideology (or Nazism and the Hitler cult) in the wake of prosperous, postwar society. In the case of Japan, the prewar/postwar divide marks a transformation yet to be adequately understood, despite the massive efforts of social scientists and Occupation policy theorists to characterize the split in terms of the ideology of modernization theory, that is, a story of transition from a pre-modern or feudal society to a modern society tied to the transformative agency of democratic capitalism under the United States.³

Within a reading of the famous Freudian text, "Memory and Melancholia,"⁴ Santner sees loss as distinguished by two experiences labeled as mourning and melancholy (quoting Freud):

In mourning it is the world, which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.⁵

Although mourning and melancholy are ultimately seen as extreme ends of the same pole and are not mutually exclusive, the key difference is that, in mourning, there is an awareness of separation between the individual and the lost object; whereas in melancholy--separation was never sufficiently established. Thus, the melancholic subject, in experiencing loss, is primarily experiencing the loss of his or her own control--what Freud characterizes as a kind of narcissism. In contrast, the subject in mourning having come to terms with genuine loss and separation--for example, the reality of death--can potentially work through the traumatic loss to a state of health. In a word, "successful," mourning.

³ See J. Victor Koschmann's *Revolution and Subjectivity in Postwar Japan* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1996).

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey London: Hogarth Press, (1953-1974), 14: 244-245.

⁵ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," p. 246.

The melancholic subject, on the other hand, continues to imagine a unity with the lost object. The object may be empirically gone, but it never really existed as a separate object or entity to begin with; thus the loss results in an unresolved melancholic state.⁶

While I cannot here, take the time to further elucidate Santner's psychoanalytic reading, I would simply suggest that war events and war responsibility also remain problematic in the case of Japan, which arguably, also remains in an unresolved melancholic state. And of course, the remembering of war-related events--such as the Japanese-American internment or atrocities committed by United States soldiers in Korea--are problems not limited to Japan or Germany.⁷

Allow me now to illustrate from statements reported in the New York Times. The first made by the governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishikawa, on April 10, 2000 in an address to the Ground Self-Defense Forces (SDF):

Atrocious crimes have been committed again and again by *sangokujin* and other foreigners. We can expect them to riot in the event of a disastrous earthquake⁸

The term, *sangokujin*, literally, "third country person," was coined during the American Occupation to simply refer to those in Japan who were not Japanese or of the Allied Forces. It later became an insult used by xenophobic Japanese and, in this case, was used in reference to immigrants.

⁶Lyotard links this unresolved melancholy philosophically to the condition of postmodernism: "Anamnesis constitutes a painful process of working through, a work of mourning, for the attachments and conflicting emotions...We have only gotten as far as a vague, apparently, inexplicable, end-of-the-century melancholy. ("Ticket to a New Decor," trans. Brian Massumi and W. G. J. Niesluchowski, in *Copyright 1* [Fall, 1997]: 10, pp. 14-15. Originally cited in Santner, 164n 13).

⁷Memory studies in the academy have flowed from Jewish studies of the Holocaust to Japanese analysis of war guilt and victimization to now Vietnam studies by American scholars.

⁸Howard French, "Tokyo Politician's Earthquake Drill is Militarist Moment," *New York Times*, (September 4, 2000).

The second quote was made on May 15th, when then Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori called Japan: a divine nation with the emperor at its center⁹

Both of these statements are shocking although not entirely unusual because they demonstrate the ongoing tenacity of beliefs characteristic of prewar ultra-nationalism. The first example resurrects pernicious lies regarding Koreans in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake¹⁰ in September of 1923, which leveled Tokyo. Rumors that Koreans had poisoned well water and had set fires incited vigilante groups to lynch hundreds of innocent Koreans living in Japan. When Governor Ishikawa used the term, he infused a contemporary anxiety with a prewar fabrication; thereby continuing the legacy of the prewar imperial domination of East Asia--although this time determined from the position of postwar economic success and the political alliance with the United States. Prime Minister Mori's affirmation of the emperor system underscores prewar ideology. Both statements raise concern about the persistent nature of certain prewar social structures which was complicit with those beliefs in the period bracketed as the "postwar." These statements by professional politicians seriously problematized the notion that the past has been overcome. On the contrary, I would contend that this notion of the past as something to overcome an integral part of modernity which establishes the past as the *mise-en-scène* or staging of its own legitimacy, ideologically speaking. What this fails to acknowledge is the degree to which modernity and theories of modernization require a certain temporization (religious, irrational, feudal, communal) and spatialization (non-western, the East) of the past, in order to sustain its own representation as the efficient, rational, secular, individuated, techno-scientific fulfillment in the present.¹¹ I

⁹ Sonni Efron, "Japan Premier's Remarks of 'Divine Nation' Stir Uproar," *Los Angeles Times*, (May 21, 2000).

¹⁰ The earthquake was the worst of the modern period, with 100,000 deaths, 550,000 buildings destroyed. See *Concise Dictionary of Modern Japan*, compiled by Janet E. Hunter Berkeley: University of California Press, (1984), p. 86.

¹¹ This ultimately figures in characterizations of fascism as an insufficiently modernized remnant of a religious past, which was rekindled, rather than understand it as a development of enlightenment rationalism. Because modern discourses on enlightenment and rationalized society marginalize and mutually exclude religious discourses as irrational and, therefore, "pre-

contend that, during the modern period, the space and time of the "fulfilled present" has been most powerfully occupied by the nation-state.

In the context above, I would like to explore how memory projects, such as, film and education curricula, or sites of memory, such as, memorials or museums, nearly always affirm national categories, while using *Rashomon* and *After Life* as examples where national memory is disrupted in its imagining work. Indeed, even in modern democratic societies where the local voice, the formerly unrepresented, is emphasized, more often than not, this too is subsumed by the larger category of the nation; representation, perhaps, but these memories find their place to the degree to which they affirm a common, national memory. Thus, specific tragedies and points of resistance are effectively suppressed in local voice, too, the formation of a national memory, underscoring the fact every act of remembering is also an act of forgetting. In terms of the history of modern Japan, this battle over national memory is evidenced in the bitter contest over history textbooks in the national curriculum.¹²

Rashomon

The film is set somewhere in the time of great social calamity--wars, famine, at the very end of the late Heian period of the twelfth century. The main scene is shot in the time of the film's present at the ruins of the Rashomon gate, where a few individuals gather for shelter from the constant rain and refer elliptically about an event-- a murder and robbery-- which they cannot reconcile happening:

I can't believe such a thing could happen. I don't understand how it could've happened.

modern," the continuity between these discourses remains hidden, even though they are, in reality, interdependent. In this way, modern knowledge retains the framework of truth value whereas religion becomes subsumed in the general category of aesthetic knowledge. Because of the situation outlined above, it is impossible to fully account for statements such as Prime Minister Mori's or any of the latest shockingly fascist utterances coming out of mainstream Japanese politicians or intellectuals. Again, they are not feudal aberrations of the modern in a return of the repressed; they are its legacy whose origins have been hidden.

¹² See note 17.

With these words, the film proceeds to hear different accounts from the different individuals explaining the crime--each illustrated with a flashback filmed sequence of each story. It is left rather unclear throughout the film as to who actually committed the crime, although there is a strong suspicion that it was one of the tellers (the woodcutter).

The film has been compared to *Citizen Kane* in terms of influence upon other filmmakers, and was acknowledged most recently in Oliver Stone's ideas for *JFK*. For my purposes here, I would like to suggest that the central issue--who did it--while key, must also be seen in light of the greater social context of the times, in other words, the defeat of the Japanese imperial nation in its campaigns in Asia and its status as an occupied territory by the Western Allies, principally, the United States.¹³ Perhaps, the inability or anxiety regarding remembering accurately the crime in question can be seen as an allegorical description of the condition of the Japanese nation, in its inability to acknowledge its responsibility and agency in crimes committed against its Asian neighbors. Seen in this light, the problem of memory in the film is a direct reflection of a defeated nation coming to terms (or not) with the question of culpability.

Besides, however, the socio-political frame, I link this inability to remember to an epistemological crisis; an agnosticism regarding, not an incredulity towards narratives in a Lyotardian sense, but incredulous narratives which have become real--that is, the nuclear holocaust of Hiroshima. In a secular age, seeing is believing, but with science eclipsed, not even physical, sensual experiences can be so readily grasped because they elude belief and the imagination's capacity to lay hold of them.

A sometime controversial historian, Hayden White, in his article, "The Modernist Event,"¹⁴ argues not that historical events are unknowable, but that the categories of modern knowledge that under girded the binaries

¹³ While drawing upon entirely different meanings, I would like to acknowledge first encountering this allegorical reading of the film from James Davidson's "Memory of Defeat in Japan: A Reappraisal of *Rashomon*," in Donald Richie's edited *Focus on Rashomon* Englewood Cliffs: Spectrum Books, (1972).

¹⁴ Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," *The Persistence of History; Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack New York: Routledge, (1996), pp. 17-38.

of fact/value or reality/fantasy may no longer hold; thus the objective narratives that they sustained have come into question. That is, the stability of what was considered a fact--its separation from "value"--was only sustainable if the object of knowing was kept in its respective sphere; in short, either contained within the Kantian category of cognitive reason, ethics, or aesthetics.

Taking this a bit further, perhaps the nature of catastrophic events in modern history--atomic bombs, total war, the holocaust--"push the envelope," thus destabilize the categories by which we know "things." If I understand White here, I think he means that our reticence about knowing with certainty may not be due to a lack of respect for "facts," but because the notion of what is epistemologically permissible or knowable--what thoughts can be thought--has been exceeded.

Thus, in order to write history and be responsible towards acts of memory, especially about catastrophes, it may be necessary not only to insist on the adherence to particular facts, but to "work through" what kind of imagination may be required to render events as stable, knowable, believable.

But since memory is selective, at issue here is the complicit relationship between memory and history. In other words, in what ways does memory act as a guarantor of history? By analyzing the narrative structure of memory, I would like to now explore the ways in which a certain kind of memory construction in modern film and prose novel narratives supports the construction of a national memory and, by extension, a national identity. I believe that in the post-religious, modern world, the nation-state functions as a guarantor of meaning, a repository in which separate and individual memories are rendered intelligible in national narratives, such as those presented in film and literature. Therefore, as in Santner's argument about the "unhealthful" kind of mourning in which the subject over-identifies with the lost object--suppressing the reality of death--filmic and novelistic narratives are used to create a sense of national unity which suppresses fragmentation, both of film itself and in modern social formations; providing powerful imagery. An imagery, which is not only filmed, but is film.

To help me illustrate this link between memory, narrative form, and the suppression of loss or death, let me quote from Walter Benjamin:

The novel is significant not because it presents someone else's fate to us but because the stranger's fate by virtue of

the flame, which consumes, it yields us the warmth, which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about¹⁵

Here is a similar quote from J.M. Bernstein:

Because modern life has no natural *telos*, no unequivocal (transcendent) end or ends, then our finitude becomes the condition for all our ends and thus our proper end. By this latter I mean no more than that the recognition of the absoluteness of death is a necessary condition for comprehending projects and plots in a world from which God has departed... Only death, we might say, can raise life to the level of fate.¹⁶

Since death provides the closure from which, as in eulogies, links can be drawn to make sense of a person's existence, mainstream Hollywood film narratives, as in traditional novels, perform the work of memory and nostalgia.¹⁷ For example, the typical narrative will often begin with the film's present, then start narrating a story which dissolves back in the time of the story. There may be periodic returns to the film present, but increasingly as the film moves closer to the story's culmination, that moment of the narrated story encased within the film narrative forms a

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn New York: Schocken Books, (1969), p. 101.

¹⁶ J.M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel; Lukacs, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, (1984), pp. 136-137.

¹⁷ Also see Rey Chow's articulation of this in an analysis of Pasolini "Observations on the Sequence Shot" in *Hermetical Empiricism*. Chow quoting Pasolini: "It is necessary to die, because as long as we live, we have no meaning...Death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives; that is, it chooses the truly meaningful moments and puts them in a sequence, transforming an infinite, unstable, and uncertain present into a clear, stable, certain past. It is only thanks to death that our life serves us to express ourselves. Editing therefore performs on the material of the film...the operations that death performs on life." *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* New York: Columbia UP, (1995), p. 32.

unity and a perfect loop; the beginning is the end and the end is the beginning.¹⁸ In other words, this kind of narrative form is a nostalgic act of information retrieval based upon a mimetic projection or a portrayal of the remembered past which places a high regard for the aesthetics of realism, as in a flashback. Because existence itself does not yield the kind of satisfying closures needed in linear narratives, the circular loop performs a death--often times based upon an actual death or from the perspective of the old age of a character in the story--in the sense that the story narrated has already lapsed. It is being lived a second time through the narration. For the film viewer, this loop is doubled, as the narrated story is embedded within the larger framework of filmic time. In a sense, you may only live once, but you die twice at the movies.

In returning to *Rashomon*, there is a unified temporal structure to the film--the several flashbacks always return to the present context, and the overwhelming disturbance is moral, in other words, we all know everyone but one is lying. Nevertheless, following White, I would like to suggest that part of the moral ambiguity borders on the epistemological, as well; the uncertainties spill over into skepticism of what actually happened at all, precisely because the event itself is unmanageable and cannot be regulated by modern knowledge--leaving the viewer with a set of narrative fragments.

The Modern Epistemological Break: Philosophic Editing

As a result, the inability to render and stabilize catastrophic events by narrative structures may indicate that these events cannot be contained as objects of knowing by the modern subject of epistemology. This instability, in turn, leads to a split within the subject itself, as the impossibility of rendering the object is inextricably linked to a schism in the subject. Stated differently, it is hard to form memory in a narrative sense because it exceeds the faculty of the imagination--the unthinkable thought. I will summarize

¹⁸ This is also, I believe, the philosophical content of modern nationalism also, I contend, not only informs key philosophic political texts, such as Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, in its presentation of the State as the organic fulfillment of the World Spirit, resolving and harmonizing all fragmentation and particularism which Hegel ascribed to modern social life, but narrative form, as well. It is this narrative form which I would like to link to the work of memory.

and then link this discussion of the split Kantian subject and the bureaucratic nature of modern knowledge to film narrative.

According to J.M. Bernstein, the condition of a split epistemological subject and the divided categories of knowledge are the hallmark of modernity:

Modernity is the separation of spheres, the becoming autonomous of truth, beauty and goodness from one another, and their developing into self-sufficient forms of practice: modern science and technology, private morality and modern legal forms, and modern art. This categorical separation of domains represents the dissolution of the metaphysical totalities of the pre-modern age. To this day, for most philosophers this division of labor remains unimpeachable. Even writers on art who think that the proper way of comprehending art is as an institutional phenomenon hold that the language of art and art practices, are autonomous practices, wholly unlike ethical or cognitive practices. And this should tell us that the move to [replace] mental talk (aesthetic attitudes and the like) by practice (institution or language game) talk leaves the categorical separation of art and truth firmly in place.¹⁹

In this way, there is a fundamental epistemological and social loss implicit in the foundational spheres of modern knowledge, established as autonomous, disconnected activities. Important here is that since art has already been transformed in the modern--defrocked of its function as truth value--any subsequent attempts to speak in the name of art (for example, in the case of Romantic movements of art and literature as an opposition to science) already contain the divided terms of the modern split within

¹⁹ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art; Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* University Park: Penn State UP, (1992), pp. 5-6. For an intriguing synthesis of both Freud and Hegel in regard to mourning and the notion of sublation in Hegelian dialectics, see Catherine Malabou's, "History and the process of mourning in Hegel and Freud," *Radical Philosophy* 106 (March/April 2001): 15-20.

themselves. They are already marked by the disfigurement and rupture of the modern within their very natures.

By most accounts, the development of the modern subject is overwhelmingly attributed to the work of Kant. The sheer rigor of Kant's system disallows the metaphysical realm (the non-sensual and non-material) from ever becoming objects of knowledge at all; driving a wedge between the world of material phenomena and the nominal realm of freedom.

In this way, the self inhabits the world of phenomena (the world of things), but since that world remains beyond knowing, ultimately not only the world--but the self as a part of that world--remains unknowable, too; a kind of epistemological "shut-in." Thus, Kant's knowing self is fundamentally split, within itself and between itself and the world; thereby constituting what I understand to be the basically anti-nominal structure of the Kantian critical system: the dualisms between freedom/necessity, mind/body, subject/object, cognition/experience.

It is in this context that the aesthetic realm takes on an integral, mediating role, negotiating some kind of resolution. Art, including poetry, becomes the simultaneous sign of healing, while also the cause of schizophrenic illness, or madness.

Key here at the epistemological foundation of the modern is the duo-movement of rupture or break followed by reconciliation constituting virtually a secular form of redemption upon the modern subject who is, at best, a split entity.

Modifying Bernstein's analysis, I identify Enlightenment epistemology specifically with the notion of critique in Kant in two basic senses: 1) a "subjectivization" of knowing in which objects in the world conform to the mind rather than the mind to the world, and 2) a separation of knowledge into discrete categories of cognitive reason, ethics and aesthetics, each with their own methodological protocols and objects of inquiry.

In this way, Kantian epistemology articulates a profound series of ruptures: between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, between mind/body, between disciplinary spheres based upon instrumental reason, between cognition and experience and between irreconcilable splits within the subject itself.²⁰

²⁰ In its autonomy and isolation, the condition of Kant's knowing subject bears a striking parallel to the general plight of privatized individuals in

More to the point, the transformation of art to aesthetics according to the modern division of philosophic labor divests art of its truth-value--its content--relegating it instead to contemplative reflections on the experience of formal beauty. The modern nation thus represents a symbolization of the "logic" of the modern, mutually constituting both the subject and the object of beauty. Thus, as an apotheosis of the nation, its national-aestheticism, exists not in spite of, but rather, because of the epistemological breaks located within the subject itself.

The key point here is that while Enlightenment epistemology may signify rupture, the break is primarily internal. In other words, the differences between pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment structure of knowledge and the life-worlds they inform are very real--the differences in their philosophic systems is central to this thesis--but they are not essential. Indeed, part of what allows modern knowledge (the forms of science, scientific realism) to discredit and disenfranchise pre-existing forms of truth is its depiction of the pre-modern as a knowable entity (with a beginning and an end), while reorganizing its structure of knowledge into separate spheres of duty, and suppressing their mutual overlap. Thus, again, the differences are real--they will not go away by simply denying them--but that is not the same as saying they are a historical necessity.

Hegelian dialectics attempted to overcome the epistemological splits in modernity introduced by Kant between, among other things, reason/ethics, subject/object, through a series of social mediations (national communitarianism, civic society), which are ultimately embodied in the State and symbolized through the modern subject. In Hegel's society, the individual becomes a type of modern hero who, embodying the Absolute, overcomes the social constraints of sub-institutions like the family (which Hegel criticized), as well as, the philosophic limits of Kant in a vision of social plenitude. Thus, the loss of transcendence in modernity not only entails a loss of confidence in matters of faith or theologically informed learning, but a complete transformation in terms of social and institutional practices in a secular life-world.

modern society, abstracted from the political dimension of their labor even while occupying the ideological center of liberal capitalism; that is, the knowing subject of the Kantian critiques turns out also to be the philosophic notation of the prototypical bourgeois.

The components of the Hegelian system--the world movement of the Spirit through History; the return to origins; the substantiated subject; a redemptive eschatology--are not direct transfers from theology but narrative conventions that have been transformed.²¹ Therefore, despite Hegel's invocation of History and the great forward movement of the dialectic, the desire to overcome social and philosophical separations through an apocalyptic unity is not so much a direct recalling of theology, but a secular response to an internal problem--the modern epistemological ruptures initiated by Kant.

In this way, two opposing and contradictory philosophical movements (which I characterize as Kantian and Hegelian) within the same basic epistemological development are what comprise the modern. On one hand, I believe that our modern life-world remains defined within the tensions produced by the epistemological splits associated with Kant, the basic dilemma of which is outlined below by Bernstein:

In every act of knowing there is an object known and a knowing self; so even if the object known is the self, it cannot be the knowing/creative self since this self will in all cases be doing the knowing. Thus a chasm opens up between the self as knower/creator and the self as known, between the transcendental and empirical ego.

Bernstein's analysis of Lukacs' critique of Kant explores modern subjectivity--Lukacs' Hegelian attempt to mediate Kantian antinomies--through the form of the modern novel. As he summarizes above, the modern subject is premised upon a series of profound gaps, including itself; since the self participates in both materiality and

²¹ See Robert Young's *White Mythologies: White Mythologies; Writing History and the West* London and New York: Routledge, (1990); Naoki Sakai, "Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87 (Summer 1988): 475-504; and Pheng Chang's and Naoki Sakai's articles, "Universal areas: Asian Studies in a world in motion" and "The dislocation of the West," in the inaugural issue, "Specters of the West and Politics of Translation," *Traces: A Multilingual Journal of Cultural Theory and Translation*, vol. 1 (2001): 37-94.

immateriality, the same epistemological divide that makes it impossible for the self to know things-in-themselves equally applies to itself.

Thus, the transformation of art to aesthetics signifies the “subjectivization” of art as a entity of knowing, including the premise that the aesthetic realm is itself an autonomous and divested of its former ability to generate knowledge, in the sense of truth value:

Aesthetics is subjectivized in the sense that artworks are no longer understood as artifacts imitating or representing the spatial-temporal world but are seen as above all emblems of consciousness. So whatever the relations between theory and practice may be, their nature is understood largely on the model of mental entities rather than non-mental ones.

It is my belief that, the realms of modern knowledge are divided, the possibility of bridging or mediating those gaps are played out in the realm of aesthetics. Returning to the beginning of the chapter, this is why theorization about art seems to get at the heart of what is divisive about modern knowledge formation, and is why attempts to unify theory and practice are always implicated in the aesthetic category and why the role of art remains highly problematic in political projects, i.e., the attempt to realize social meaning through the imagination. I basically read mainstream Hollywood film narrative as acting in this way, smoothing over the cuts of editing and of philosophic breaks through an aesthetic category. In other words, "art" also reflects the general division of knowledge separating truth from aesthetic value in the major break between the realms of cognitive, scientific reason and aesthetics, which evolves into a study of the subjective apprehension of beauty.

Further, I believe that the aesthetic is the realm that reveals the impulse to achieve unity that is still present in modern knowledge formation, however divided. When outlining how a subjective consciousness of art comes to a judgment of beauty, there is a sense in which the problem of penetrating form with meaning and intention is foregrounded in aesthetic theory. As mentioned before, one feature of Hegelianism is in introducing the concept of history as a unifying principle, but I would argue that, precisely, the self-realization of Reason in the world is, perhaps, the grandest fiction or narrative modernity has produced. In this specific sense, in its Hegelian form, the aesthetic--as the other of cognitive reason--contains the drive to overcome and negotiate these modern divides

through social mediation, ultimately in an apotheosis of the Hegelian subject who comes to self-knowledge and identity through the structures of the modern State.

As discussed earlier, this mediation is performed through art and I believe that mainstream film--its narrative structuring of memory--enacts this work, which, on a philosophic level, I link to the force of the Hegelian dialectic.²²

After Life

As a contemporary film, I would like to look at Hirokazu Kore-eda's *After Life*, filmed in 1998. While not a war film, *After Life* is a memory film, which self-consciously poses the questions regarding individual versus the collective memory of the nation in modern Japanese history. The film features a group of individuals who work in a dilapidated building somewhat resembling a high school. Their job is to interview a number of recent arrivals over a period of one week--in other words, people who have recently died and need to decide upon one memory to replay over and over again for eternity. As the film progresses, it turns out that the workers themselves are unable to decide upon a memory and, thus, remain in an in-between state, conducting interviews. After the workers help the newly dead to pick one memory, they set out to recreate it as a filmed, staged event for posterity. There is a final screening to view the results. There is a range of individuals being interviewed and the film explores the ease or difficulty people have choosing--accurately or at all--a single moment in their past life. The entire film, except for one segment, occurs on the campus site.

The director Kore-eda also wrote the screenplay and chose to subvert the inclination for a collective memory along national categories by periodically displacing the individual stories with fragments--violent

²² Soviet director, Sergei Eisenstein, has been perhaps the strongest explicator linking dialectics to the work of film montage: "We may yet have a synthesis of art and science." This would be the proper name for our new epoch in the field of art. This would be the final justification for Lenin's words, "that, cinema is the most important of all the arts." *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, (1949), p. 63.

fragments--of the legacy of some 50 years of Japanese imperialism. This is a remembering of the past not performed in terms of depiction--making history seem real, as in *Saving Private Ryan's* celebrated opening segment featuring the D-Day invasion--but in terms of interviews. Incidentally, some 500 people--not professional actors--were actually interviewed throughout the Tokyo area for the film, some of who appear in the film as interviewees. From the beginning then, Kore-eda's emphasis is on linguistic mediation and a self-conscious use of film within a film, in a way reminiscent of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*²³ documentary and its refusal to depict, but rather, to narrate the ongoing effects of the Holocaust by interviewing survivors, Polish villagers.

In *After Life*, the re-creation of memories emphasizes the staging technology at work in film, especially by belaboring the process through the use of primitive techniques of visual effects. Therefore, in contrast to Steven Spielberg's aesthetics of realism--realism in *Saving Private Ryan* or in Real TV's violence and voyeurism--Kore-eda does not show the viewer the past, as though it could be unproblematically retrieved as a visual experience. The film instead focuses on the non-eventfulness of life, its lack of closure; simply proceeding with the next group of dead.

In these ways, I believe that the film challenges the viewer to work through the terms and conditions of memory, as well as to problematize the relationship between individual and collective narratives. At key points, the film intersperses key historical events in modern Japanese history--the Marco Polo Bridge Incident; the failed coup d'état in February 26, 1936; the mass lynching of Koreans in the hysteria following the 1923 Kanto earthquake; and the promise of democratic reforms in the early postwar period. Indeed the first person we encounter in the mix of individuals seen in the waiting area announces, as his voice rises above the crowd, that he died in the Marco Polo Bridge incident. Several of the characters in the film were soldiers. In a sense, a background of imperial conquest and violence begins to emerge--several of the interviewees and workers are soldiers--and the question of repressed memory, the failure of Japan to work through its past, comes to light.²⁴ To begin with, the building

²³ Directed by Claude Lanzmann. 566 minutes. *French Ministry of Culture and Communication*, (1985).

²⁴ One of the best examples is the long-term lawsuit by historian Ienaga Saburo, who sued the government for censoring his entries on Japanese

itself is an abandoned high school from the early 1950s. I believe this signifies the reality of postwar Japan represented as being both economically and successfully stuck in the past. Just as the workers, who turn out to be themselves the dead who were unable to decide on a memory--thus staying on as workers--modern Japan remains in a static position without history. For a brief moment, the film action, which is entirely based at the high school and campus, moves to contemporary urban Japan. It is a surreal world of storefronts, mannequins, in other words, commodity culture's clear suppression of a sense of history; what Benjamin called "empty time."

After Life also raises the question of ethical choice, but rather than envelop the ethical life with notions of responsible citizenship and family, Kore-eda focuses it upon the choice of a punked out kid with orange hair who is particularly aggressive with the interviewers and who, simply, refuses to choose a memory. He refuses the options available, wanting to choose the future instead, but when that is out, he declines and becomes the next caseworker to remain behind.

A story, which is followed with particular care, is that of an older man who cannot think of what memory to choose, thus sits in a room with

imperialism, changing the term for "aggression" to *shinryaku*. Ienaga sued the Ministry of Education in 1965 for censoring his entries regarding the description of the Nanjing Massacre and other acts of aggression in Japan's Pacific War against other Asian nations. Ienaga's *The Pacific War, 1931-1945; A Critical Perspective on Japan's Role in World War II* New York: Pantheon Books, (1978) has been translated into English. Another involves the memorial at Peace Park in Hiroshima. The international anti-nuclear movement is, naturally, well-invested in that particular site, but as Lisa Yoneyama in *Hiroshima Traces* has argued, the universal categories of the memorial, its appeal to humankind, tends to suppress: a) that according to theories of modernization which based modernity in the West, the Japanese were not part of enlightened humankind, and b) that the Japanese were also engaged in imperial aggression in East Asia, in other words, memorializing the dropping of the Atomic Bomb under a universal category effectively suppresses the historical relations between Japan and its neighbors from the late 19th century through the end of the war. *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* Berkeley: University of California, (1999).

stacks of videotapes of each year of his life, and watches them, evaluating his life. A period of his college years is screened, in which he dates a woman who will later become his wife, and they discuss favorite films over an awkward dinner. Significantly, his favorite films are chanbara or the swashbuckling samurai films; a genre, which continues to enjoy popularity on Japanese television with the continual dramatization of famous, folkloric stories over competing clans and warlords. (Incidentally, this genre finds new life in the international popularity of Japanese anime films and comic books, which capitalizes on the mythologies surrounding warrior valor and fight-to-the-death codes). My point here is that this kind of film genre was particularly favored in the inculcation of loyalty and valor in the period of Japanese militarism and survived in the postwar period. These “historical” dramas have, as Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto has written; created a kind of distance for contemporary Japanese who, in watching these films and TV shows, keep the possibility of ethical responsibility in the present at bay.

The film is not a dismissal of the possibility of knowledge--that all knowledge of the past is hopelessly relative and selective--but rather presents memory as an integral part of the work required in order to know, and understand past events. Thus, not pitting memories, over or against history in a typical binary of personal narrative versus official accounts, but rather see the two as informing each other. Thus, in a striking case of Iseya, a young, smart-alecky, punked out man in his early 20s, he refuses to choose on ethical grounds of responsibility because choosing one memory in a hypostatic fashion rules out the imagination; make choice and possibilities irrelevant. For Iseya, then, real history is alive and fluid and only kept so if able to keep memory and their multiple possibilities alive, if even for an interpretive frame, since his life has already been lived. In this way, Kore-eda undoes the opposition between memory as personal thus unreliable and history as public and objective truth. Indeed, history in the sense of facts does matter in the film, as the historical events upset and are used to correct misperceptions of the past. There is one woman who recalls that her childhood memory concerning the Kanto earthquake was false, thus revisits that memory in her reenactment as a correction. It is not clear when she learned the truth of that time, but presumably it was as an adult that her memory was adjusted. In other words, when the film portrays her as an adult swinging in the recreated swing, living out a remembered childhood experience, it is a return mediated by age, experience, knowledge gained--not a return to innocence, which, in this case, signifies a belief in murderous lies. Memory stands corrected.

The overall strategy of *After Life* resembles Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, in that rather than flesh out the Holocaust, a philosophic stance is taken to resist realism, as reflected in Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. An allegorical approach, then, Kore-eda uses interviews (many non-actors) and emphasizes the staged aspect of the reenacted scenes. Authenticity is not seen as something to retrieve, but something that requires artifice.²⁵ In conclusion, I believe that the nation-state provides the comprehensive, modern source of unity, thus serving as the secular telos, mediating identity for modern individuals. As complex narratives, which fall outside of the traditional realist narratives associated with depicting the events of World War II, both *Rashomon* and *After Life*, to varying degrees, draw attention to the structuring of memory. As a result, in both films, history may not be apprehended as in an experiential museum.²⁶ It is rather a narrative, which places the question of how history is remembered (via stories and images) at the foreground; thus making the lives and stories of individual persons intelligible, rather than resolve individual death by silencing it through a redemptive process for a national memory.

²⁵ In this way, both *Shoah* and *Afterlife* also recall Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, which also treats the event of Hiroshima in allegorical terms. Resnais, who originally attempted to make a documentary of Hiroshima, later decided to scrap the attempt and, instead, create a film featuring actors who deal with the problem of memory. Anti-nuclear protests are themselves staged in the film, serving to bracket the realist aesthetic of the fictive film and its limitations; thus the constant phrase from the Japanese architect to the French actress who claims to have "seen" Hiroshima through films, artifacts at the museum, Peace Park memorials, "You never saw anything there..." Directed by Alain Resnais, screenplay by Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Home Vision Cinema [distributor], (1997), 86 minutes.

²⁶ I use Alison Landsberg's definition in her careful analysis of The United States Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy," *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* Ithaca, NY, (1997), Spring-Summer 71: 63-86.

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